One Day in the Season of Rain

Mohan Rakesh's *Āshādh kā Ek Din* (1958)

Translated from Hindi by
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Dramatis Personae

AMBIKA	an old woman in the village
MALLIKA	her daughter
KALIDAS	a poet
DANTUL	a courtier
MATUL	the poet's uncle
NIKSHEP	a man from the village
VILOM	a man from the village
RANGINI	a woman from the city
SANGINI	a woman from the city
ANUSWAR	an official
ANUNASIK	an official
PRIYANGUMANJARI	a princess—the poet's wife

Act One

Before the curtain rises, soft sounds of thunder and rain, which continue for a few moments after, then gradually fade away.

The curtain rises slowly.

An ordinary room. The walls are made of wood, but their lower portion is plastered with smooth clay. Hindu swastika symbols are painted here and there in vermillion. The front door [with two panels] opens into a dark entranceway. On both sides of the doorway are small niches containing little unlit clay lamps. A door upstage left [also with two panels] leads to a second room. When this door is open, only one corner of a simple bed is visible. Both doors are also plastered with clay, and are decorated with outlines of lotuses and conch-shells in vermillion and deep yellow. Upstage right is a large lattice window through which lightning is occasionally visible.

On one side of the room is a small wood-burning clay stove. Clay and brass pots and pans are arranged neatly around it. On the other side, a little away from the lattice window, are three or four large clay jars discolored by soot and moss. Their mouths are covered with reed mats kept in place with stone weights. Next to the lattice window is a large wooden seat with a tiger skin draped over it. Near the stove are two low square stools. [Little clay lamps are arranged in a row along the front edge of the stage. On one of the walls is a bracket to hold a wooden torch.]

Ambika sits on one of the square stools, husking grain in a reed winnowing pan. She looks towards the window once, sighs deeply, then busies herself with the winnowing again.

The front door opens and Mallika enters, shivering and hugging herself in wet clothes. Ambika remains busy, with her eyes lowered. Mallika pauses for a moment, then approaches her.

MALLIKA: The first day of the rainy season, and such rain, Ma. Such torrents of rain. Even the most distant foothills were drenched. And me, too. See how wet I am, Ma!

Ambika looks her up and down once, and becomes busy again. Mallika kneels next to Ambika and rests her head on the latter's shoulder.

I went out thinking I'd watch the flight of cranes coming in from the south, and now, look, all my clothes are soaking wet.

She kisses her mother's hair and stands up, shivering with the cold.

Where are my dry clothes, Ma? If I stand here like this, I'll freeze. . . . Why aren't you saying anything?

Ambika looks at her angrily.

AMBIKA: The dry clothes are on the bed inside.

MALLIKA: You've already put them out?

She goes towards the inner room.

You knew I'd get wet. And I knew you'd be worried. But, Ma . . .

Near the door she turns and looks at Ambika.

. . . I'm not at all sorry about getting wet. If I hadn't gotten wet, I'd have been deprived of something today.

She leans against the door.

Smoky clouds were gathered all around. I knew it was going to rain. Yet I kept going down and down the trail, into the valley. At one point, the wind even blew away my shawl. Then it began to drizzle.

Her gaze meets Ambika's.

Let me change, then I'll come and tell you. That was an amazing experience, Ma—really amazing.

Mallika goes inside. Ambika gets up and puts the winnowed grain into one of the large jars, and takes out fresh grain from another. Mallika's words continue to be heard from the inner room. The audience also catches a glimpse of her every now and then.

Tender and moist like the blue lotus, gentle as a breeze, and picturesque as a dream! I wanted to fill myself with the experience, and close my eyes. . . . Even my body's being wrung out, Ma! How much water have my clothes soaked in! Oh! After the sting of coldness, this touch of warmth.

She begins humming.

[***Song***] The water-lily that is blue,
Blue without a blemish,
Is vain about its eminence. . . .

Where shall I put the wet clothes, Ma? Shall I leave them here?

[***Song***] The mildest movements stir,
Stir the gentle breeze,
In all its gentleness. . . .

Travelers, in distress
Without their homely women,
Are vexed and perplexed. . . .

She returns to the front room.

I'll never forget those moments today, Ma. I've never witnessed such beauty before. As though that beauty were intangible—yet incarnate. I could touch it, see it, drink it in. At that instant I understood what turns feeling into poetry. For the first time in my life I understood why someone would get lost in a train of clouds caressing the mountain peaks, why someone would be so enchanted by images appearing and disappearing in the sky, instead of being absorbed in his own body and mind. . . . What's the matter, Ma? Why are you so quiet?

AMBIKA: You can see I'm working.

MALLIKA: Well, you're working all the while. But you aren't quiet like this all the time.

She comes and sits near Ambika, who continues to winnow the grain in silence. Mallika takes the winnowing pan from her hand.

I won't let you work. . . . Talk to me.

AMBIKA: What do you want me to say?

MALLIKA: Say anything. Scold me for coming back soaked. Or tell me that you're tired, so I should husk the rest of the grain. Or say that you were home alone, and didn't like it.

AMBIKA: I like everything.

Ambika takes the winnowing pan from Mallika.

And when am I not alone at home? Am I not alone even when you're here?

MALLIKA: I'm not going to let you work any more.

She takes back the winnowing pan from Ambika's hand, and puts it down near the large jars.

You're alone even when I'm at home? . . . Sometimes you reproach me for getting in the way of your work when I stay at home. And sometimes you say. . . .

She puts her arms around Ambika's neck from behind.

Tell me, why are you so somber?

AMBIKA: I've boiled the milk. Add some sugar and drink it.

MALLIKA: No, answer me first.

AMBIKA: And go rest on the bed for a little while. I still have to. . . .

MALLIKA: No, Ma, I don't want to rest. Why should I rest when I'm not tired? Within me, I can still feel the sensation of the raindrops falling on my skin. Every fiber of my being is still tingling. Why don't you answer me? If you keep doing this, I won't talk to you, either.

Saying nothing, Ambika wipes her eyes with the end of her sari. She then pushes Mallika away from behind herself, and forces the latter to sit down on one of the square stools. Mallika looks at Ambika in silence for a moment.

What's happened, Ma? Why are you crying?

AMBIKA: Nothing, Mallika! Sometimes one gets sad without any reason.

MALLIKA: One gets sad without any reason. But one doesn't just sit and cry. . . . If you don't tell me what's wrong, Ma, you'll be forsworn.

Some noise and the sound of horses' hooves are heard in the distance. Ambika rises and goes to the window. Mallika remains sitting for a moment, then also walks to the window and looks out. The sound of hooves approaches and then recedes.

Who are these people, Ma?

AMBIKA: They're probably royal court officials.

MALLIKA: What are they doing here?

AMBIKA: Who knows what they're doing here. . . . Every few years these characters turn up in our village. And, whenever they appear, there's some calamity or other. Sometimes they bring news of a war, sometimes of an epidemic.

She takes a deep breath.

When your father died in the last plague, I saw the same figures here.

Mallika shudders from head to toe.

MALLIKA: But why have these people come here today?

AMBIKA: Who knows why they're here.

Ambika tries to pick up the winnowing pan again, but Mallika stops her by the arm.

MALLIKA: Ma, you haven't told me what's wrong.

Ambika stares at her for a moment. Mallika lowers her eyes.

AMBIKA: Agnimitra has returned today.

Ambika picks up the winnowing pan and goes back to her stool. Mallika remains standing at the window.

MALLIKA: He has returned? From where?

AMBIKA: Where I sent him.

MALLIKA: You sent him?

Her lips begin to quiver. She advances towards Ambika.

But I'd said there was no need to send Agnimitra anywhere.

Gradually her voice grows more agitated.

You know I don't want to get married, then why do you keep trying? Do you think I just rant and rave meaninglessly?

Ambika takes up fistfuls of grain, rubs it between her palms, and lets it drop into the winnowing pan.

AMBIKA: I can see that things are turning out exactly as you wish. Agnimitra has brought back the message that the people to whom I sent him aren't interested in this match. They say. . . .

MALLIKA: What do they say? What right do they have to say anything at all? Mallika's life is her own property. If she wishes to destroy it, then who has the right to criticize her?

AMBIKA: When have I said that I have the right?

Mallika turns her head sharply and tries to suppress her anger.

MALLIKA: I'm not talking about your right.

AMBIKA: You may not say it, but I'm saying it. Today your life is your own property. I have no rights over you.

Mallika sits down on the other square stool and places her hand on Ambika's shoulder.

MALLIKA: Why do you talk like this? . . . Why don't you try to understand me?

Ambika removes Mallika's hand from her shoulder.

AMBIKA: I know that, today, even you don't have any rights over yourself. But I can't bear such an insulting transgression.

Mallika crosses her arms over her knees and rests her head on them.

MALLIKA: Ma, I know there's unpleasant talk. I also understand your unhappiness. And yet I don't feel guilty at all. I've followed an impulse and chosen one emotion out of many. For me, that one bond is greater than all other bonds. I'm really in love with this one emotion—which is pure, tender, imperishable.

Ambika's face becomes distorted.

AMBIKA: And I feel repelled by such an emotion. "Pure, tender, imperishable!" Hnh!

MALLIKA: Ma, why don't you trust me?

AMBIKA: What you call emotion is only duplicity and self-deception. "I've followed an impulse and chosen one emotion!". . . I ask you, what does it mean to choose emotion on an impulse? How does that fulfil the necessities of life? . . . "Chosen one emotion on an impulse!" Hnh!

Mallika stares at the ceiling for a moment.

MALLIKA: The gross necessities of life aren't everything, Ma. There's so much else besides them.

Ambika begins to winnow the grain again.

AMBIKA: Maybe there is—I don't know.

Mallika looks at Ambika for a few moments.

MALLIKA: The truth is, Ma, like other people in the village, you, too, look at him with suspicion and revulsion.

AMBIKA: The other villagers don't know him as well as I do.

For a moment they stare at each other.

I detest him.

Mallika's face becomes marked with anguish, helplessness, and strong feeling.

MALLIKA: Ma!

AMBIKA: What do other people have to do with him? But I do. His influence is destroying my home.

Kalidas's voice can be heard from the entranceway. The lines on Ambika's brow deepen. She stands up with the winnowing pan. She looks towards the entrance for a moment, then walks towards the inner room.

MALLIKA: Wait, Ma, why are you leaving?

AMBIKA: A mother's life is action, not emotion. She has a lot to do around the house.

Ambika leaves. Kalidas enters, carrying a fawn in his arms and soothing it. Blood drips from the fawn's body.

KALIDAS: We'll live, little fawn, won't we? We won't give up our life after being wounded by an arrow. So what if our body's tender. We can endure pain. If an arrow can take life, then a hand's gentle touch can also give life. We'll find new life. We'll rest on some soft blankets. Our limbs will be massaged with oil. Tomorrow we'll roam in the forest again. Feed on succulent grass. Won't we?

Mallika gathers herself and goes towards the door.

MALLIKA: This wounded fawn . . . what kind of person here would have wounded it? Is it that, as in the South, here, too. . . ?

KALIDAS: I've noticed many new presences in our rural province today.

He moves towards the window seat and sits down on it.

Some court officials have come to the village.

He hugs the fawn to his chest and starts comforting it.

KALIDAS: Will we go to sleep now? Yes, if we sleep for a little while, our pain will go away. But, before that, we have to drink some milk. . . . Mallika, if you have some milk, get it in a bowl.

MALLIKA: Ma has boiled the milk. I'll go see.

She goes to the stove and starts looking among the pots and pans around it.

Just a little while ago we saw two or three court officials passing by on horseback. Ma says that whenever these people appear, there's some

calamity or other. After the exhilaration of the rain . . . I found all this very strange.

She picks up the pot of milk and begins to pour some into a bowl.

Ma's very upset today.

Kalidas begins to rock the fawn in his arms.

KALIDAS: We're better than before. Our pain's slowly receding. We're getting better. . . . I don't understand how he could shoot an arrow at this body that's soft as cotton. It came bounding into my lap. I said, I'll take you where you'll find eyes like your mother's, and love like hers, too.

He looks at Mallika. She comes up to him with the milk.

MALLIKA: Really, Ma's very upset today. She realized that I was with you in the rain—otherwise I wouldn't have come back soaking wet. Ma's always so worried about scandal.

KALIDAS: Let me hold the milk, and you take the fawn in your arms.

He takes the bowl from Mallika's hand. She takes the fawn in her arms and brings its mouth close to the milk. Kalidas brings the bowl even closer.

KALIDAS: We won't drink the milk? No—we aren't going to be so obstinate! We'll certainly drink the milk.

The courtier Dantul enters and pauses near the door. He watches them for a moment. Kalidas holds the milk to the fawn's mouth.

Yes, like this . . . like this.

Dantul advances into the room and comes close to them.

DANTUL: You want to give it milk and makes its flesh even more tender?

Kalidas and Mallika look at him, startled. Mallika retreats a little with the fawn. Kalidas places the bowl of milk on the seat next to himself.

KALIDAS: So far as I know, we aren't acquainted—how did you dare to enter a home where you're a stranger?

Dantul looks once at Mallika, then at Kalidas.

DANTUL: What a coincidence—I wanted to ask you exactly the same kind of question! We've never been acquainted, but you had no scruples about carrying away a deer brought down by my arrow. Luckily, there's a trail of blood leading to this door—otherwise, would I've been able to track you down on this dark, overcast day?

KALIDAS: I can see that you aren't a native of this region.

Dantul laughs sarcastically.

DANTUL: I applaud your insight! My appearance itself is an indication that I don't belong to this place.

KALIDAS: I'm not saying this because of your appearance.

DANTUL: After looking at the lines on my brow, then? It seems that, besides robbery, you also practice clairvoyance.

Mallika advances a little, looking as though she is hurt.

MALLIKA: Don't you feel ashamed casting such aspersions?

DANTUL: Forgive me, lady. But this fawn you're carrying in your arms has been wounded by my arrow. So it's my property. You'll return my property to me, won't you?

KALIDAS: In this province, there's no hunting of deer, sir. You're an outsider, so it's enough that we don't treat you as a criminal for this act.

DANTUL: So villagers will sit in judgment on a courtier's crime! My rustic friend, do you even know the meaning of crime and justice?

KALIDAS: It's surprising to learn that words and meanings are the property of courtiers.

DANTUL: You seem to be a smart fellow. Yet you don't know that the rights of courtiers extend far and wide. I'm getting late. Give me this fawn.

KALIDAS: This fawn is the property of this mountain region, sir. And we, the inhabitants of this region, are its kinsmen. You're making a mistake if you think that we'll hand it over to you. . . . Mallika, take it inside and lay it down on the bed or on a blanket. . . .

Ambika emerges suddenly from the interior.

AMBIKA: The beds and blankets in this house aren't meant for fawns.

MALLIKA: You can see, Ma. . . !

AMBIKA: Yes, I can see. That's why I'm speaking out. The beds and blankets are for people, not for animals.

KALIDAS: Give me the fawn, Mallika!

He puts down the bowl of milk and advances to take the fawn in his arms.

The cushion of my arms will be enough for it. I'll take it home with me.

He walks towards the door.

DANTUL: And Dantul the courtier will simply watch you taking it away!

KALIDAS: That depends on the courtier's preference.

He walks to the entrance without glancing at Dantul.

DANTUL: Perhaps it will be necessary to acquaint you with what the likes and dislikes of a courtier are.

Kalidas leaves. Only his response is heard offstage.

[KALIDAS (*offstage*):] Perhaps.

DANTUL: Perhaps?

He wants to go after Kalidas, with his hand on his sword. Mallika moves quickly to stand between Dantul and the door.

MALLIKA: Stop, sir! Don't insist on taking the fawn. For you it's a question of your right, for him it's a question of compassion—though unarmed, Kalidas won't think twice about your weapon.

DANTUL: Kalidas? . . . You mean to say that the man with whom I was arguing about the fawn is the poet Kalidas?

MALLIKA: Yes—yes. But how do you know that Kalidas is a poet?

DANTUL: How do I know! Every member of Ujjayini's royal court knows the poet Kalidas, the author of the long poem, A Gathering of Seasons.

MALLIKA: Every member of Ujjayini's royal court knows him?

DANTUL: The emperor himself has read A Gathering of Seasons and praised it. That's why the court now wants to honor its author, and offer him the position of court poet. That's precisely why Acharya Vararuchi has come here from Ujjayini.

On hearing this, Mallika seems to freeze with astonishment.

MALLIKA: The court wants to honor him? Offer him the position of court poet. . . ?

DANTUL: I regret that my conduct with him was uncivil. I should go and apologize to him.

He leaves. Mallika remains standing like that for a few moments. Then suddenly she seems to become conscious again. In the meantime, Ambika picks up the bowl of milk and puts it in the corner. She looks at the pan that had contained the milk earlier, then pours the rest of the milk into a smaller tumbler, adds some sugar, and stirs it. Her hands are trembling, as though she were deeply agitated. Biting her lower lip, Mallika runs up to her.

MALLIKA: Did you hear, Ma? The court wants to appoint him court poet.

Ambika somehow holds on to the tumbler of milk falling from her hands.

AMBIKA: I've spread the wet clothes out to dry. There's a little milk left, and I've added sugar to it.

MALLIKA: Ma, didn't you hear what the courtier was saying?

AMBIKA: Drink your milk. I hope that now nobody else will require hospitality here.

MALLIKA: Hospitality? . . . I'd like to be able to welcome the whole world into this home today.

She takes the tumbler from Ambika's hand.

Shall I bathe you in this milk, Ma?

She raises the tumbler. Ambika snatches it from her hand.

AMBIKA: I've done enough bathing in milk already.

MALLIKA: How heartless you are, Ma! Didn't you hear that the court's honoring him? Even then, you. . . .

AMBIKA: Drink your milk. And if you aren't dying to soak in the rain again, I'll lay out your bedclothes. . . . And if I'm heartless, let me be.

Mallika puts her arms around Ambika's neck.

MALLIKA: No, you aren't heartless. When did I say you were heartless?

AMBIKA: No, you didn't say so. Drink your milk.

Mallika takes the tumbler from her hand, finishes the milk in a single gulp, and puts it down in a corner. Then she pulls Ambika by the hand, makes her sit down, and lies down [on the floor] with her head in Ambika's lap.

MALLIKA: Ma, can you imagine how happy I'm feeling today?

AMBIKA: I don't have the strength to think about anything. Now let me get up, I've lots of work to do.

She tries to get up, but Mallika holds her down.

MALLIKA: No, don't get up. Just sit like this. . . . The court's honoring him, Ma! He's going to be appointed court poet . . .

Suddenly she leaves Ambika's lap and sits up.

. . . he, whom the people close to him have never tried to understand, to this day. Who has only been attacked and disgraced inside and outside his home. . . . Surely, you can now believe, Ma, that my emotion isn't baseless.

Ambika stands up.

AMBIKA: I've already told you that my power to think and understand is dead.

MALLIKA: Why, Ma? Why are you so prejudiced? Why can't you think of him with generosity?

AMBIKA: I'm past the stage at which one can live with one's eyes shut to reality.

She moves towards the interior. Mallika stands up.

MALLIKA: And your realistic vision can detect nothing but flaws?

Ambika turns and stares at her for a moment.

AMBIKA: Where there's a flaw, my vision certainly sees a flaw.

MALLIKA: What flaw do you see in him?

AMBIKA: That man's completely self-centered. He has no attachments to anyone other than himself in the whole wide world.

MALLIKA: Just because he doesn't tend to his uncle Matul's cows, and remains lost in the clouds?

AMBIKA: I'm not concerned with Matul and his cows. I'm looking only at my own home when I say this.

MALLIKA: Sit down, Ma!

She grabs Ambika by the hand and takes her to the window seat.

I want to understand what you're saying.

AMBIKA: I, too, want you to understand this today. . . . You say your bond with him is one of emotion. What's that emotion?

MALLIKA: I don't give it any name.

She sits down at Ambika's feet.

AMBIKA: But people do give it a name. . . . If he really has an emotional bond with you, then why doesn't he want to marry you?

MALLIKA: You've never been generous towards him, Ma. You know perfectly well the ironies of circumstance in which he has lived all his life. What his condition has been in Matul's home. In that deprived and resourceless life, how could marriage even be imagined?

AMBIKA: And now, when his life will no longer be deprived and lacking in resources?

Mallika falls silent for a few moments and stares at her feet.

However great a reason deprivation may be for avoiding commitment, the end of deprivation becomes an even greater reason for refusing to commit.

MALLIKA: This is Vilom's language, not yours.

AMBIKA: I understand his kind of man very well. His only connection with you is that you're a receptacle and a refuge through which he can love himself, be proud of himself. But aren't you a flesh-and-blood person? Don't you—and doesn't he—have any obligation towards you? Tomorrow, when your mother's no longer physically present, and there is no arrangement in the house for even one meal a day, how will you answer the question confronting you? Will your emotion be able to resolve that issue? Tell me again now that this is Vilom's language, not mine.

Mallika sits silently for a few moments, with her head bowed. Then she looks at Ambika.

MALLIKA: Ma, life has somehow managed to pass so far. What's yet to come will also pass. But today, when his life is taking a new direction, I don't want to stand up before him, proclaiming my self-interest.

Matul's voice is heard offstage.

MATUL *[offstage]*: Ambika! . . . Ambika! Are you at home, or aren't you?

Ambika and Mallika look towards the entranceway. Matul enters in a disheveled state.

Indeed, you're at home! I'm going to announce to the entire village that I've no connection whatever with this creature who bears the name of Kalidas.

MALLIKA: What has happened, Arya Matul?

MATUL: I raised him, I nurtured him. All for this day—so that he could betray his clan like this?

MALLIKA: But what we've heard is that he's being honored by the court. Some senior scholar has come from Ujjayini.

MATUL: That's exactly what I'm saying. Some scholar has come from Ujjayini.

MALLIKA: But you were just saying. . . .

MATUL: I'm saying it right. The scholar wants to take Kalidas with him to Ujjayini right away, tomorrow.

MALLIKA: But. . . .

MATUL: He has come with two chariots, two charioteers, and four mounted guards. Didn't I always tell you, Ambika, that the son of the son of the daughter of the founding father of our clan fought for the Gupta empire against the Shaka invaders?

AMBIKA: You were talking about your sister's son.

MATUL: I'm still talking about him. You should understand that, in one respect, the court's honoring our entire clan. And this glorious descendent of our clan says, "I don't want this honor. . . ."

Mallika stands up abruptly.

"I'm not here to be bought and sold with royal coin," he says.

Matul begins to pace up and down the room excitedly. Mallika stands oblivious for a few moments.

MALLIKA: He doesn't want to accept the court's honor?

MATUL: I can't understand how buying and selling comes into this business. If you're given an honor, accept it. Otherwise, what's poetry worth?

MALLIKA: Poetry has some value, Arya Matul, that's why the honor also has value. . . . I can understand where this honor pricks his conscience.

Lost in thought, Ambika begins to twist the end of her sari in her fingers.

AMBIKA: I assure you, Matul, that he'll definitely go to Ujjayini.

Matul continues to pace.

MATUL: He'll definitely go! These people are his devotees who'll sing his praises and carry him away!

AMBIKA: When a person receives an honor, the indifference he expresses towards it increases his importance. You should be happy that your sister's son is well-versed in public relations too.

Matul stops suddenly.

MATUL: If this is public relations, then I'll have to say that public relations and pinhead relations amount to the same thing.

He resumes pacing.

When a person offers something—whether wealth or honor—he can also change his mind—and when the mind changes, it changes.

He stops again.

You think about it—the emperor can even take offense that an ordinary poet has turned down his honor.

Nikshep enters.

NIKSHEP: Matul, you're still here, while the Acharya's waiting for you over there.

MATUL: And what are you doing here, Nikshep? Didn't I tell you to stay with the Acharya until I got back?

NIKSHEP: But you also told me to inform you as soon as the Acharya had finished resting.

MATUL: Yes, I said this. But I also said that. This you could understand, but that you couldn't?

NIKSHEP: But, Matul. . . .

MATUL: But what? Is Matul a fool? Tell me, do you think I'm a fool?

NIKSHEP: No, Matul. . . .

MATUL: If I'm not a fool, then you're a fool, for sure. . . . What did the Acharya say?

NIKSHEP: He said that he wants to tour this entire village region with you . . .

An expression of pride appears on Matul's face.

. . . the region that gave birth to Kalidas's poetry.

Matul's expression changes to one of revulsion.

MATUL: Kalidas's poetry!

He starts pacing again.

God knows what special qualities such a great scholar sees in his poetry!

He pauses and looks at Ambika.

This man has no sense of even ordinary conduct with people, and you talk about his public relations. . . . His lordship was coming home with a fawn in his arms. Luckily, I spotted him just outside the house. I pleaded with him: "O master of the tribe of poets, this is not the time to enter our home in such a state. A great scholar has come for you from Ujjayini, and is waiting for you." As soon as he heard this, his lordship turned away. As though he'd seen a snake in his path.

Mallika sits down near Ambika on the window seat. Matul resumes pacing.

AMBIKA: Mallika, bring Matul a seat from the inner room.

Mallika begins to rise, but Matul stops her.

MATUL: No, I don't want a seat. The Acharya's waiting for me.

Nikshep looks at Ambika and smiles. Matul walks up to the end of the room and turns back.

I said to him, "O poet supreme, the Acharya's here to take you back to Ujjayini with him. You'll be honored by the court."

Matul stops again.

Hearing this, his lordship paused. Pausing, he looked at me with fire in his eyes. —"I'm not here to be bought and sold with royal coin." —He said this as though the coins of the royal treasury were consumed by longing for him, and then he left. . . . A moral dilemma rose before me: should I pursue his lordship, begging and pleading, or should I look after my

guests? Then I came here, after telling this Nikshep to stay with the Acharya—and now he has followed me here, like a wheel that has spun off its axle.

NIKSHEP: But, Matul, I've just come to inform you that. . . .

MATUL: And I thank you for keeping me informed. Well done! The guests are sitting over there without a host, and you've come all the way here to inform me! . . . And, now, just do me this one favor—wherever that crown jewel of the tribe of poets may be, please find him and bring him back.

Matul moves towards the exit.

My sense of duty tells me that I should present him before the Acharya in whatever way I can. . . . And my brain tells me that, wherever I find him, I should seize him then and there by the tuft of his poetic hair, and. . . .

Matul exits.

NIKSHEP: Matul's third eye is always open.

MALLIKA: But where's Kalidas right now?

NIKSHEP: Kalidas is at the temple of the goddess Jagdamba at this moment.

MALLIKA: Have you seen him?

NIKSHEP: I've seen him.

MALLIKA: But you didn't tell Matul?

NIKSHEP: I didn't want Matul to go there straight away.

MALLIKA: Why? You, too, don't want Kalidas to. . . ?

NIKSHEP: I want Kalidas definitely to go to Ujjayini. That's why I didn't think it would be appropriate for Matul to go to him at this time. . . . Matul gets so much pleasure from listening to the words coming out of his mouth that he talks and talks, and doesn't wish to understand the situation around him. . . . Kalidas's determined to stay in Jagdamba's temple and not go home until the guests from Ujjayini have left.

AMBIKA: What foresight!

NIKSHEP: Foresight?

AMBIKA: Of course, it's foresight.

NIKSHEP: Where's the foresight in this, Ambika!

Ambika gives Nikshep a sharp look.

AMBIKA: The court wants to honor the poet. Indifferent to the honor, the poet's lost in meditation at Jagdamba's temple. The court's representatives come to the temple and supplicate the poet. The poet opens his eyes very slowly. . . . Isn't it foresight to create such a big drama?

NIKSHEP: Kalidas isn't creating a drama, Ambika! I'm convinced that courtly honors don't hold any attraction for him. He really doesn't want to leave this mountain region.

Ambika rises from her seat and goes towards the pots and pans near the stove.

AMBIKA: Doesn't want to leave! . . . Hnh!

She takes a platter to one of the large jars and begins to take out fistfuls of rice grain.

NIKSHEP: No one's persuasion—neither Matul's nor anyone else's—can overcome his obstinacy.

He gives Mallika a meaningful look. She lowers her eyes.

There's only one person at whose request he could possibly give up his stubbornness.

Ambika sizes up Nikshep's meaningful look and then looks at Mallika.

AMBIKA: No one in our house is concerned at all whether he yields or he doesn't.

Ambika takes the platter to the stove and, with her back to the other two, tries to busy herself.

NIKSHEP: In his sensitivity Kalidas is forgetting that he'll lose a great deal by dismissing this opportunity. Ability molds only one quarter of one's personality—fame and recognition complete the rest. Kalidas should definitely go to the royal capital.

Ambika tries to appear busy but fails.

AMBIKA: So what's impeding him?

NIKSHEP: I've sensed that somewhere, at the root of his obstinacy, there's a streak of profound bitterness.

MALLIKA: I know where that streak lies. . . . He had a confrontation with a courtier a little while ago.

NIKSHEP: Only you can dispel that bitterness, Mallika! Opportunity doesn't wait for anyone. If Kalidas doesn't leave this place, the court will not lose anything. The office of court poet won't remain vacant. But, for the rest of his life, Kalidas will remain what he's today—a local poet! Even the people who're praising A Gathering of Seasons today will forget him in a short while.

Mallika, seemingly lost in thought, stands up abruptly.

MALLIKA: No, he should not disparage this honor. This is a tribute to his poetic self. He shouldn't deprive that self of its rights. Come, I'll go with you to Jagdamba's temple.

Ambika gets up suddenly.

AMBIKA: Mallika!

Mallika gives Ambika a fixed look.

MALLIKA: Ma!

AMBIKA: Will I have to say in front of an outsider that I'm not in favor of your going there at this time?

NIKSHEP: Nikshep is not an outsider, Ambika!

MALLIKA: This is a crucial moment, Ma! I really must go there right now. Come, Arya Nikshep.

Mallika exits, without glancing at Ambika. A wave of anger crosses Ambika's face, and changes into an expression of defeat. Nikshep stands still for a moment, observing Ambika's emotions.

NIKSHEP: Please forgive me, Ambika.

He follows Mallika. Ambika remains standing for a few moments with her eyes closed. Then she stares at the household objects one by one, and, as though broken, sits down on a stool and begins to rub the rice grains, lying on the platter, between her palms. Her eyes brim over with tears, which she wipes with the end of her sari. The lights dim. Choked words escape her lips.

AMBIKA: Emotion! . . . Oh!

She covers her face with the end of her sari. The lights dim further. Just then the glow of a wooden torch appears in the darkness of the entranceway. Vilom enters with the torch in his hands. At the sight of Ambika sitting like this, he pauses momentarily. Then he draws close to her.

VILOM: The gathered clouds have cast an untimely darkness today, Ambika—or have you lost track of time?

Ambika raises her head from her sari. In the torchlight, her face looks furrowed and her eyes appear sunken.

I'm surprised that you haven't lit the lamp as yet.

AMBIKA: Vilom! . . . Why are you here?

Vilom moves towards the lamp in the niche on the left [of the front door].

VILOM: Shall I light the lamp?

He lights the lamp with his torch.

Vilom's visit isn't such a surprise.

He begins to light the lamps set along the stage front. Ambika rises.

AMBIKA: Go away, Vilom! You know very well that . . .

VILOM: . . . that Mallika finds my visits intolerable.

He lights more lamps and looks at Ambika.

I know, Ambika! Mallika's very innocent. She doesn't know anything about the world and life.

He props up the torch in the bracket on the wall.

She doesn't want me to enter this house because Kalidas doesn't want me to.

He turns around and approaches Ambika.

And why doesn't Kalidas want me to come here? Because he sees the truth of his own heart staring back at him from my eyes. He feels bewildered. . . . But you know very well, Ambika—my only flaw is that I say bluntly exactly what I feel.

AMBIKA: I don't want to discuss your faults and virtues right now.

VILOM: I can see that you're very unhappy right now. . . . And when have you not been unhappy, Ambika? Your very life is a chronicle of pain. Are you a little thinner than before? . . . I've heard that Kalidas's going to Ujjayini.

AMBIKA: I don't know.

As though he hadn't heard her, Vilom goes to the window.

VILOM: The court will honor Kalidas. He'll live in Ujjayini as the court poet. I think that he and Mallika should get married before he leaves. You've surely thought about this.

AMBIKA: I don't want to think about anything right now.

VILOM: You, Mallika's mother, don't wish to think about it? That's astonishing.

AMBIKA: I've told you, Vilom, you should leave.

VILOM: Kalidas will go away to Ujjayini, and Mallika—whose name has become the subject of malicious gossip all over this province because of him—will be left behind here? Right, Ambika?

Saying nothing, Ambika sits down on the window seat. Vilom turns around to face her.

Right? Have you endured all the pain for so many years only for this outcome? Even a distant observer can tell what you've had to go through all these years. Time has destroyed the unity of your mind, body, and soul.

You've let yourself be consumed atom by atom, so that Mallika wouldn't experience any deprivation. And today, when deprivation for the rest of her life is the issue before you, you don't want to think at all?

AMBIKA: You aren't diminishing my pain by saying all this, Vilom! I'm asking you to leave me alone now.

VILOM: I think it's essential for me to be with you in this situation, Ambika. I've come to say all these things—not to you, but to him. I'm hoping that he'll come here soon with Mallika. I saw Mallika going towards Jagdamba's temple. I want to wait here for her.

Kalidas appears in the entranceway, with Mallika behind him.

KALIDAS: You won't have to wait very long, Vilom.

On seeing Vilom, Mallika displays signs of anger and revulsion, and moves to the window. Kalidas draws close to Vilom.

I know where, when, and why you eagerly look for face-to-face encounters with me. . . . Tell me, what new poetic technique are you studying these days?

VILOM: The study of poetic techniques is not my inclination.

KALIDAS: Yes, I know you have a different tendency.

He looks at Vilom pointedly.

That tendency has probably divorced you completely from poetics.

VILOM: There's no doubt that today you can take great pride in your mastery of poetry.

He approaches the wall and begins to fiddle with the torch in its bracket. His face glows in the torchlight.

I've heard that an invitation has come from the capital.

KALIDAS: I've heard, too. Were you unhappy?

VILOM: Unhappy? Yes, yes, very. Who isn't sorry to lose a friend? . . . Will you leave at the first auspicious opportunity tomorrow, at the crack of dawn?

KALIDAS: I've no idea.

VILOM: I've a perfectly good idea. The Acharya certainly wants to leave at the auspicious moment of dawn. Living in the luxury of the capital, you won't forget this provincial village, will you?

He glances at Mallika, then looks again at Kalidas.

It's said that once a person reaches the city, he becomes a very busy man. Life there has so many kinds of attractions—entertainment halls, wine-houses, all sorts of pleasure chambers!

Mallika's expression hardens visibly.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom, this isn't the time or place for such talk. I didn't expect to see you here now.

VILOM: I know you aren't pleased to see me. But I came to see Ambika. We hadn't met for a long time. This is not such an unwarranted thing.

KALIDAS: Nothing that Vilom does is unwarranted. But his not doing a lot of things could be unwarranted.

VILOM: It's really a matter of great joy, Kalidas, that we understand each other so well. There's certainly nothing in my nature that's hidden from you.

He gazes at Kalidas for a moment.

What's Vilom? An unsuccessful Kalidas. And Kalidas? A successful Vilom. In some ways, we come very close to each other.

He moves away from the torch and approaches Kalidas.

KALIDAS: Without a doubt. All opposites come very close to each other.

VILOM: It's good that you accept this truth. Because of the prerogative that intimacy gives me, can I ask you a question? . . . It's possible that I may never have another opportunity to talk to you. Just a day's interval will take you very far from us, won't it?

KALIDAS: Even the interval of years doesn't separate opposites from each other. . . . I'm eager to hear your question.

Vilom comes very close and places his hand on Kalidas's shoulder.

VILOM: I want to know that you're still the same Kalidas—aren't you?

He gives Ambika a meaningful look.

KALIDAS: I don't know what you mean.

He removes Vilom's hand from his shoulder.

VILOM: What I mean is—are you still the same person that you were till yesterday?

Mallika leaves the window and advances towards them.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom, I don't find this kind of presumption forgivable.

VILOM: Presumption?

Vilom draws close to Ambika. Kalidas moves a couple of paces in the other direction.

What's presumptuous about this? I'm asking a very meaningful question. Well, Kalidas? Isn't my question meaningful? . . . What do you think, Ambika?

Ambika gets up in an agitated state.

AMBIKA: I don't know anything about this—nor do I want to know.

She begins walking towards the inner room.

VILOM: Stop, Ambika!

Ambika stops and looks at him.

A whole lot has been said all this while, all over this village region, about Kalidas's relationship with Mallika.

Mallika takes another step forward.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom, you. . . !

VILOM: In view of that, wouldn't it be appropriate for Kalidas to say clearly whether he's going to Ujjayini alone, or. . . .

MALLIKA: Kalidas isn't bound to answer any question you ask.

VILOM: When did I say that he's bound to answer me? But it's possible that Kalidas's conscience will compel him. Well, Kalidas?

Kalidas turns around. The two come face to face with each other.

KALIDAS: I certainly feel bound to praise you. You enter not only people's homes, but also their lives, without any right to do so.

VILOM: Enter without any right? . . . I? Well, Ambika, to what extent do you agree with Kalidas's claim that I, Vilom, intrude upon people's lives without any right to do so?

AMBIKA: I've already said that I don't have anything to say about all this.

She goes into the inner room.

VILOM: That's it—she's walking away? Alright, Kalidas, you tell me—to what extent do you find your own claim appropriate? Whose life have I invaded? Come, let's go to the village and ask anybody. . . .

He gives Kalidas a malevolent look. Then he goes to the torch, pulls it out of the bracket, and holds it in his hand.

So, you aren't compelled even by your conscience to answer my question! Perhaps the question itself is such. . . .

KALIDAS: You're free to speculate as you wish. All I know is that I don't have the slightest desire to leave this province and go to Ujjayini.

Vilom brings the torch close to Kalidas's face.

VILOM: Undoubtedly! Why would you have such a desire? An ordinary person may have it, but why would you have it? But I only want to know that, if it so happens—let's assume for a moment that you decide to go—then, in such a situation, isn't it appropriate that. . . .

Mallika positions herself between Vilom and Kalidas. The torchlight falls on her face.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom, the way you're talking today, you've crossed your limit. I'm not a child—I understand what's in my best interest. Perhaps you haven't realized that your presence here, at this time, is like the presence of an unwelcome guest.

VILOM: I didn't think it was necessary to acknowledge that. I know that you despise me. But I don't despise you. That's reason enough for me to be here.

He throws the torchlight again on Kalidas's face.

There was one other thing, too, that I wanted to say to Kalidas.

Looking meaningfully at Kalidas, he turns again to Mallika.

You're very close to Kalidas, but I know Kalidas much better than you.

He looks again at both of them, one by one, and moves towards the entranceway. From there, he turns around and looks once more at Kalidas.

May your journey fare well, Kalidas! You know that Vilom's just your well-wisher.

KALIDAS: Who can know that better than me?

A contemptuous sound escapes from Vilom's lips, and he looks at Mallika.

VILOM: It's possible that this unwanted guest may intrude again sometime. Asking your forgiveness in advance for that, too. . . .

He smiles sardonically and leaves. Kalidas looks at Mallika for a moment. Then he goes to the window.

MALLIKA: You're sad again?

Kalidas continues to look out of the window.

Look, you've given me your word.

Kalidas turns back and draws close to her.

KALIDAS: Think again, Mallika. The issue isn't merely one of accepting an honor and court patronage. There's a much larger issue before me.

MALLIKA: And I'm that issue . . . am I not?

She takes him by the arms and draws him to the window seat.

Sit here. You know me. Don't you?

Kalidas continues to gaze at her.

Do you think I'd be happy if you spurned this opportunity, and continued to live here?

Trying to suppress her tears, she blinks and begins to look upwards.

I know that your departure will fill me with emptiness. The outside world will perhaps feel very desolate, too. Inspite of that, I'm not deceiving myself.

She tries to smile.

I'm saying from my heart that you ought to go.

KALIDAS: I wish you could see your eyes right now.

MALLIKA: My eyes are tearful because you don't understand what I'm saying.

She sits down on the floor near him and places her elbows on his knees, [crossing her arms].

Do you think you can be very far from me, even if you leave? If you stay on in this province, how will your talent have the opportunity to develop? The people here don't understand you. They want to test you by the touchstone of mediocrity.

She rests her chin on her forearm.

You believe, don't you, that I know you? I know that if any limit encircles you, you'll be hemmed in. I don't want to constrain you. That's why I say— go.

KALIDAS: You're not grasping this fully, Mallika. The question is not that of your confining me.

Stung by these words, Mallika still tries to retain her composure. Kalidas gets up as though lost in thought, and begins pacing.

I feel that this village region is my true ground. I'm attached to this land by many threads. Among these threads are—you, this sky and these clouds, the greenery here, the young deer, the herdsmen.

He pauses and looks at Mallika.

If I leave this place, I'll be uprooted from my land.

Mallika rests her elbows on the seat and leans on it.

MALLIKA: Why don't you consider the possibility that you'll find the new soil richer and more fertile than the soil here? You've already absorbed whatever you could from this landscape. At this stage, you need new soil that will make your self more complete.

KALIDAS: A new land could also dry me up.

He begins pacing again.

MALLIKA: There's no soil that doesn't contain a measure of freshness. Your imagination will certainly find a way to be touched by that freshness.

KALIDAS: And that life will also come with its own expectations. . . .

Rising and drawing close to him, Mallika takes his hands in her own.

MALLIKA: Why is it necessary for you to fulfil those expectations? You can create your own new expectations in others.

KALIDAS: Even so, a lot of doubts and apprehensions keep cropping up. I don't feel any enthusiasm in my heart.

MALLIKA: Look at me.

Kalidas gazes into her eyes for several moments.

You still don't feel any enthusiasm. . . ? Believe me, you won't be separated from this place even after you've gone away. The wind, the clouds, the deer of this landscape—you'll take all of them with you. . . . And I, too, won't be far from you—I'll be gathered up in the clouds that come floating by.

Lightning flashes and thunder rolls in the background. Kalidas continues to hold her hands. Mallika tries to control her tears by blinking.

It looks like rain, again. As it is, it's grown very dark. The Acharya must be waiting for you.

KALIDAS: Are you asking me to leave?

MALLIKA: Yes! You'll see—after you've left, I'll be cheerful, I'll roam about a lot, and every evening I'll go to Jagdamba's temple, to watch the sunset. . . .

KALIDAS: This means that I should take my leave of you.

MALLIKA: No! I'm not going to give you leave. Because you're going, I'll only pray that your passage be noble.

She lets go of his hands.

Go.

Kalidas shuts his eyes for a few moments. Then he turns abruptly and leaves. Hiding her face in her hands, Mallika goes to the window seat and sits down. In the background, loud thunder, and the sounds of rain beginning. Even as she tries to control herself, Mallika begins to sob. Ambika emerges from the interior and puts her hand on Mallika's head. Then she raises Mallika's face.

AMBIKA: Mallika!

Mallika rises from the seat and moving to the window, leans her head against its frame.

You're unwell, Mallika. Come inside and rest.

Mallika remains standing in that posture, trying to control her sobs.

MALLIKA: Let me stay here, Ma. I'm not unwell. Look, Ma, what dense clouds have gathered all around us! Tomorrow, these clouds will travel towards Ujjayini. . . .

She sobs again with her face in her hands. Ambika goes to her and holds her close.

AMBIKA: Don't cry, Mallika.

MALLIKA: I'm not crying, Ma. What's pouring from my eyes isn't grief. It's happiness, Ma, happiness. . . .

She hides her face on Ambika's breast. The sound of thunder again, and the noise of rain growing louder.

❦

End of Act One

Act Two

Some years later.

The same room. The room is in a perceptibly different state. The plaster is peeling in several places. The swastikas, conch shells, and lotuses painted in vermilion are now faded. There are far fewer pots and pans around the stove. There are only two clay jars, and they are now covered with moss. A few sheets of bark manuscript are scattered on the seat near the window, and some of them are wrapped in silk. There is a broken round cane stool near the seat, on which lies a book made of bark sheets sewn together. Near the stove is a clothesline, on which a few clothes are spread to dry. Most of the clothes are noticeably tattered, and have been repaired with patches.

Another broken round cane stool is placed near the entranceway. There is only one square stool left, on which Mallika sits, grinding medicinal herbs in a mortar. The corner of the bed in the inner room is visible as before. Ambika is lying on the bed. Every now and then, she turns on her side. Nikshep enters. Mallika adjusts her shawl.

NIKSHEP: How's Ambika's now?

MALLIKA: She still gets a fever periodically, as before.

NIKSHEP: No difference at all?

MALLIKA: Doesn't look like it.

NIKSHEP: The same recurring illness, for two years running!

Mallika sighs with resignation, and begins to pour the powdered medicine from the mortar into a bowl. Nikshep drags the second cane stool and sits down near her.

Ambika really worries too much.

MALLIKA: She also doesn't take her medicine as she should.

She adds milk and sugar to the medicine and stirs it. Nikshep sits with his fingers intertwined, gazing at her.

NIKSHEP: How's your health?

MALLIKA: It's okay.

NIKSHEP: You've been losing weight. . . . No one has come from the capital for a long time.

Mallika averts her eyes and keeps stirring the medicine busily.

I sometimes think that I should go to Ujjayini and meet him.

MALLIKA: Why?

NIKSHEP: I want to talk to him about a lot of things. I often feel that it's all my fault.

Mallika looks at him gravely.

MALLIKA: What's your fault?

Nikshep takes a deep breath.

NIKSHEP: You know what it is. . . . I didn't expect Kalidas to go to Ujjayini and become a native of the city like this.

MALLIKA: And I'm very happy that he's so busy with his life there. Here he wrote only A Gathering of Seasons. There he has composed several new long poems. The merchants who came this way two years ago brought me copies of The Birth of the Young God and The Cloud-Messenger. They said there was a lot of talk about another big poem of his, but they couldn't get a copy of it.

NIKSHEP: For that matter, it's said that he has also written some plays that have been performed in Ujjayini's entertainment halls. Even so. . . .

MALLIKA: Even so, what?

NIKSHEP: It pains me to say this. We also heard so many other things from the lips of those traveling merchants. . . .

MALLIKA: When a man prospers, many kinds of rumors get linked with his name.

NIKSHEP: I'm not talking about mere gossip.

He gets up and starts pacing.

We also heard, didn't we, that he was married to a princess of the Gupta dynasty.

MALLIKA: So, what's wrong with that?

NIKSHEP: From one angle, there's nothing wrong. But what about his insistence while he was here—that he'd never get married?

He pauses and looks at Mallika.

What happened to that assertion? Didn't he realize that, to honor his vow, you. . . ?

MALLIKA: So far as his life's concerned, I don't figure anywhere. I'm one among countless ordinary people. He's extraordinary. He needed someone extraordinary as his companion in life. . . . People say that the princess is very learned.

NIKSHEP: Yes, I've heard. She has studied many philosophies and disciplines. I said, didn't I, that from one angle, there's nothing wrong with this situation. But, looking at it from another angle, one feels a great deal of regret.

MALLIKA: On the contrary, I feel an aversion to myself—for, being what I am, I could have become an obstacle to his success. If I hadn't encouraged him to leave at your urging, what a great loss it could have been!

NIKSHEP: That's exactly why I'm sad—if you hadn't done this at my urging, then your life wouldn't have taken this form today.

MALLIKA: How's my life different from what it was? Earlier, Ma used to do the work. Now, she's unwell, and I do the work.

NIKSHEP: That's all the difference one can see on the outside.

MALLIKA: That's all the difference.

She stands up with the medicine.

Let me give Ma her medicine. I'll be right back.

She goes in, and, helping Ambika to sit up, feeds her the medicine. Ambika swallows, then shakes her head. Nikshep strolls over to the lattice window. Outside, the sound of horses' hooves approaches, and then recedes. Nikshep continues to watch from the window. Having taken her medicine, Ambika lies down. Mallika emerges from the inner room, and turns in the doorway to look at Ambika.

MALLIKA: Ma, if you're cold, shall I shut the door?

Ambika nods. Mallika shuts the door. Nikshep steps away from the window.

NIKSHEP: Looks like some outsiders are visiting us again today.

MALLIKA: Who?

NIKSHEP: They're probably court officials. I noticed a couple of figures like the ones we saw when the Acharya came to fetch Kalidas.

A shiver runs through Mallika.

MALLIKA: The same kind?

Suppressing her mood, she tries to laugh.

Do you know what Ma says about this? She says that whenever these figures appear, some calamity or other strikes us. Sometimes war, sometimes an epidemic! . . . But nothing of the sort happened last time.

NIKSHEP: Didn't happen?

Averting her eyes again, Mallika busies herself with checking out the wet clothes on the line.

MALLIKA: What happened? . . . And whatever happened was for the best.

She removes one or two garments from the clothesline, and spreads them out again.

It's so humid these days that clothes don't dry for hours.

The sound of hooves is heard again. Nikshep goes to the window once more. Suddenly, he exclaims in surprise.

NIKSHEP: Is that him—is it? . . . No? . . . But how not?

The sound of hooves recedes into the distance. Nikshep steps away from the window in agitation.

MALLIKA: Why are you suddenly perturbed, Arya Nikshep?

NIKSHEP: I've just seen someone else passing by on horseback.

MALLIKA: So what? Like Ma, are you, too, dreading a disaster?

NIKSHEP: That's a very familiar figure, Mallika!

MALLIKA: A familiar figure?

NIKSHEP: I'm sure it's Kalidas himself.

Mallika freezes, still clutching the clothes in her hand.

MALLIKA: Kalidas? . . . How's that possible?

NIKSHEP: I saw him with my own eyes. He has gone galloping towards the mountain peak. Others may not be able to recognize him in his royal garb, but Nikshep's eyes can't be mistaken. . . . I'll go and look right away. The court officials must have come with him.

Nikshep leaves in a state of agitation.

MALLIKA: He's here, and he has gone towards the mountain peak?

She bites her finger, and, experiencing pain, approaches the window mechanically, as though in a daze. Rangini and Sangini appear in the entranceway. Mallika looks at them in surprise. Rangini pushes Sangini forward.

RANGINI: Ask her, can we come in?

Sangini pushes Rangini forward, and herself steps back.

SANGINI: You ask.

Mallika approaches them.

RANGINI: Okay, I'll ask. . . . Look here, is this your home?

MALLIKA: Yes, yes. Please come in. . . . Have you come to visit me?

Rangini and Sangini enter the room, and look around with searching eyes.

RANGINI: We haven't come to visit anyone in particular. Just think of it this way— we're here for no reason at all, we're just wandering about the countryside.

SANGINI: We want to see the homes around here.

RANGINI: And we want to study the life here.

SANGINI: Let me perform the introductions first. This is Rangini. She's a student of dance at the theater academy in Ujjayini. She's also interested in writing plays.

RANGINI: And this is Sangini—she's learning how to play the double conical drum and the seven-stringed Indian lute in the same academy. She writes very beautiful love songs. Now she's inclining towards prose. And how do you introduce yourself?

Mallika does not answer, and stares at them in astonishment.

SANGINI: You haven't introduced yourself.

MALLIKA: I have nothing to introduce. Please come, take this seat by the window.

SANGINI: We've come here to study, not to sit down. What do you people call this kind of space?

MALLIKA: Which space?

RANGINI: Her intended meaning is this entire space where we are at this moment. In Ujjayini we call this a room. What do you people call it here?

MALLIKA: A room.

RANGINI: You people also call a room a room? And . . .

Going up to the large clay jars, she touches one of them.

. . . this?

MALLIKA: A jar.

RANGINI: A jar. You call a room a room, and a jar a jar?

She shrugs her shoulders in disappointment.

SANGINI: Look, don't you have any local words here?

Mallika continues to stare at them in bewilderment.

MALLIKA: Local words?

SANGINI: Yes. Regional dialect words. Don't you know—the great Sanskrit grammarian, Patanjali, has noted that some people say *yenn* for *when*, and *zenn* for *then*. As he states, "*Yenn* is *yenn* and *zenn* is *zenn*."

MALLIKA: I don't possess such great learning.

Sangini sits down on the window seat with a disappointed look. Rangini walks around the room, inspecting each and every object closely. Mallika goes up to Sangini.

SANGINI: Look, we want to learn a few things that are uniquely connected to life in this place. Your homes and clothing are almost like ours. What's truly special about life here?

MALLIKA: Truly special about life here?

For a moment she looks towards the window.

I don't know. From every angle, our life's very ordinary.

SANGINI: I find that unacceptable. This region has given birth to an extraordinary talent like Kalidas. Each and every thing here ought to be extraordinary.

After examining all the objects around the stove carefully, and after peeking into the inner room, Rangini rejoins Sangini.

RANGINI: Look, let me explain to you. The thing is that, by royal order, we're both doing research on the background of poet Kalidas's life. You can understand what a big and important task this is. But, after wandering about this place, we're almost in despair, because there's no material here at all.

SANGINI: Okay, tell us the names of some of the local plants.

MALLIKA: What kinds of plants?

RANGINI: What kinds of plants?

She begins to ponder.

Kalidas has written in his poem, The Birth of the Young God, about "great healing herbs that are radiant jewels." What are these medicinal herbs that emit light?

MALLIKA: Herbs don't emit light.

Sangini rises abruptly.

SANGINI: Herbs don't emit light? Do you mean to say that Kalidas has written something that's untrue?

MALLIKA: He hasn't written anything that's untrue. What he has actually written is that. . . .

RANGINI: Let it be, Sangini! She doesn't really know much about this place.

Sangini also rises, with a grimace of disappointment.

SANGINI: Okay, we've wasted a lot of your time. Forgive us. Let's go, Rangini!

Both leave. Mallika shuts the front door. She sits down on the floor near the window seat, and rests her head on the scattered sheets of bark manuscript. She closes her eyes.

MALLIKA: You've come back today after many years. I used to think that, on the day of your return, the clouds would be gathered in the same way, the day would be dark in the same way, I'd get drenched in the rain again in the same way, and I'd say to you—look, I've read all your poems. . . .

She picks up a few pages.

How often have I begged the merchants traveling to Ujjayini to bring back copies of your poems for me! . . . I thought that I'd sing verses from The Cloud-Messenger to you. That the temple bells would ring out from the mountain peak, and I'd place this gift from me in your hands. . . .

She picks up the bound volume lying on the round stool.

That I'd say—look, this is for your next work. I've prepared these blank bark pages and stitched them together with my own hands. Whenever and whatever you write on them, I'll feel that I, too, am present somewhere, that I, too, have something.

She heaves a sigh, and puts down the blank book.

But now that you're here, the whole atmosphere's quite different. And . . . and I'm unable to understand if you yourself are the same, or. . . ?

Someone knocks on the door. She gets up quickly, straightening her clothes, and opens the door.

Anuswar and Anunasik appear in the entranceway, standing together. Mallika looks at them with incomprehension.

ANUSWAR: I'm certain I'm standing before the lady Mallika at this moment.

MALLIKA: Yes—go ahead.

ANUSWAR: Please accept greetings from the servants of lord Matrugupta.

They both greet her with a deep bow. Mallika continues to gape at them.

MALLIKA: Lord Matrugupta? Who's this lord Matrugupta?

ANUSWAR: The lord of poets, the creator of A Gathering of Seasons, The Birth of the Young God, The Cloud-Messenger, and The Lineage of Lord Rama, the scholar who's a master of politics, and the future governor of Kashmir. Lord Matrugupta's royal consort, a daughter of the Gupta dynasty, the supremely accomplished lady Priyangumanjari, is eager to be in your august presence, and desires to arrive here shortly. We, her minions, are here to give you advance notice of her arrival.

MALLIKA: The author of A Gathering of Seasons, The Cloud-Messenger, and so forth, is Kalidas, but you're saying that. . . .

ANUSWAR: He's on his way to take up the governorship of Kashmir, on behalf of the Gupta dynasty. His new name's Matrugupta.

MALLIKA: He's going to be the governor of Kashmir? And . . . and . . . his royal consort's coming to meet me?

ANUSWAR: I'm sure that, on this proud occasion, you'll consider it essential to carry out a few changes in the arrangement of objects in the room where you receive your guests. Taking this as your command, we'll accomplish the task with our own hands right away. Come, Anunasik.

Entering the room, the two of them begin to examine all the objects with an eye to managing the change. Mallika moves aside, to be out of their way. Anunasik goes up to the window seat.

ANUNASIK: I believe this seat should be near the front door.

ANUSWAR: The princess will enter through the door, and the seat will be placed near it?

ANUNASIK: In that case, this seat should be moved from its present position seven finger-widths to the south.

ANUSWAR: To the south?

He shakes his head in disagreement.

To my mind, its position should be five fingers to the north. The sun's rays fall directly upon it through the window.

ANUNASIK: I don't concur with you.

ANUSWAR: I don't concur with you.

ANUNASIK: So?

ANUSWAR: So, this being a contentious issue, the seat should be left where it is.

ANUNASIK: Okay, then. Let it remain where it is. And these jars?

He goes up to the large jars.

ANUSWAR: To my mind, one jar should be in this corner, and the other in that corner.

ANUNASIK: But, to my mind, the jars shouldn't be here at all.

ANUSWAR: Why?

ANUNASIK: There's no answer to "why."

ANUSWAR: I don't concur with you.

ANUNASIK: I don't concur with you.

ANUSWAR: So?

ANUNASIK: So, the jars should also be left where they are.

They both go towards the part of the stage where clothes have been spread out to dry on a line. Mallika gathers up the bark sheets scattered near the window seat, places them on the round stool, and goes quietly into the inner room. Anuswar touches the damp clothes on the line.

ANUSWAR: These clothes?

ANUNASIK: The clothes are still damp, so they shouldn't be removed.

ANUSWAR: Why?

ANUNASIK: That's the standard procedure, according to the canonical books.

ANUSWAR: What standard procedure is that?

ANUNASIK: That I don't remember.

ANUSWAR: But you do remember that such a standard procedure exists?

ANUNASIK: Yes.

ANUSWAR: So?

ANUNASIK: So, this is an obscure and dubious topic.

ANUSWAR: Yes, it's certainly an obscure and dubious topic.

ANUNASIK: Since the whole subject is so dubious, the clothes, too, should be left where they are.

ANUSWAR: Okay, then. The clothes, too, should be left where they are.

ANUNASIK: But this stove must definitely be moved from its present position.

ANUSWAR: Moving the stove would mean that all the objects around it would also have to be moved. That would take a lot of time.

ANUNASIK: In addition to time, it would also take a lot of patience and persev erance.

ANUSWAR: In addition to patience and perseverance, it would also take a lot of manual labor.

ANUNASIK: To my mind, handling pots and pans is not appropriate for people of our rank and station.

ANUSWAR: To my mind, too.

ANUNASIK: So, do we both concur that the stove shouldn't be moved from its present position?

ANUSWAR: To my mind, we both concur.

Anunasik looks all around himself.

ANUNASIK: There's nothing else left to be done, is there?

Anuswar also looks all around himself.

ANUSWAR: To my mind, there's nothing else left to be done.

ANUNASIK: No—there's something left.

ANUSWAR: What?

ANUNASIK: This square stool's lying in the way here. It should be removed from its present position.

ANUSWAR: I concur.
ANUNASIK: So?

ANUSWAR: So?

ANUNASIK: So, it should be removed.

ANUSWAR: Yes, it should definitely be removed.

ANUNASIK: So?

ANUSWAR: So?

ANUNASIK: Remove it.

ANUSWAR: Who—me?

ANUNASIK: Yes.

ANUSWAR: Not you?

ANUNASIK: No.

ANUSWAR: Why?

ANUNASIK: There's no answer to "why."

ANUSWAR: Even so!

ANUNASIK: I asked you first.

ANUSWAR: But you noticed the stool first.

ANUNASIK: So?

ANUSWAR: So?

ANUNASIK: Move it.

ANUSWAR: You move it.

ANUNASIK: Then let it be.

ANUSWAR: Let it be.

ANUNASIK: What now?

ANUSWAR: Yes, what now?

ANUNASIK: Let's review everything once more.

ANUSWAR: Yes, let's review everything once more.

Matul enters in an agitated state.

MATUL: Members of the official class, has your work here been duly completed?

ANUNASIK: What say you, Anuswar?

ANUSWAR: Yes, it has been duly completed. It has, hasn't it? What say you, Anunasik?

ANUNASIK: Yes, it's all done. All that's left is to review everything once more.

ANUSWAR: Yes, all that's left is to review everything once more.

MATUL: Then let that review be, for now. Princess Priyangumanjari has arrived outside.

ANUNASIK: The princess has arrived outside! Then let's go, Anuswar.

ANUSWAR: Let's go.

Both walk out together. Matul follows them, and returns in a few moments, showing Priyangumanjari the way.

MATUL: She's the most virtuous, most modest, and most innocent girl in the whole region. . . .

Mallika emerges from the inner room.

Come, come, Mallika! I was just singing your praises to the princess.

He laughs obsequiously.

From the moment she arrived, the princess has been asking only about you. . . . So this is our Mallika, the royal swan of this province. Um . . . um . . . Mallika, which seat has been chosen for the princess?
Mallika ceremonially greets Priyangumanjari, who smiles and acknowledges the greeting.

PRIYANGU: Arya Matul, you should go and rest now. The attendants will wait outside until I'm ready to go back.

MATUL: But a seat for you. . . ?

PRIYANGU: Please don't worry about that. I won't be inconvenienced.

MATUL: Of course you'll be inconvenienced. It's quite another thing if you choose not to consider an inconvenience an inconvenience. And this, in fact, is what's called nobility. The mark of a noble family is precisely that. . . .

PRIYANGU: Please go and rest. I've already tired you out.

MATUL: Tired me out? You have?

He laughs obsequiously again.

Would I be tired out by you? Even if you were to tell me to go up and down between the bottom of a gorge and the top of a mountain all day long, I still wouldn't get tired. Matul's body is made of iron—solid iron. I won't indulge in self-promotion, but, in addition to intellectual brilliance, our clan also possesses a great deal of physical strength. I've often covered ten leagues in a day while tending to my herds. I say that the hardest work in the world is raising a herd. If even one animal strays from the path, then. . . .

PRIYANGU: Look, your animals must be wandering off even as we speak. Please go and check on them at least once.

MATUL: Do you think I still look after animals? A connection with the Gupta dynasty—and the tending of animals? I sold off all my animals years ago. And, to tell the truth, even that turned out to be profitable for me, because. . . .

Priyangu's gaze meets that of Mallika. She advances and takes Mallika's hands in her own.

PRIYANGU: You're really just the way I'd imagined you.

Somewhat perturbed, Mallika continues to stare at her.

MATUL: Because . . . oh . . . oh . . . okay. Then please give me leave. A lot of things are in a mess in my house. I've to make a lot of different arrangements. So the attendants will wait for you. . . . Even so, if you have any orders for me, please send me word. . . . Mallika, make some definite arrangement for the princess to sit down. Otherwise, she'll remain standing like this. Okay, I'm leaving. If you have any orders, please let me know.

PRIYANGU: You should go. There's no need to worry about anything here.

MATUL: Okay . . . okay. . . !

He starts on the way out.

Why do I need to worry? Mallika's here—and Ambika's here to worry . . . Nevertheless, if you have any task for me, please let me know. . . .

He exits. Priyangumanjari gazes at Mallika for a moment, and then reaches out and touches her chin.

PRIYANGU: You're really very beautiful. Do you know, even though we're unacquainted, you don't seem unfamiliar to me.

MALLIKA: Please sit down, won't you?

PRIYANGU: No, I don't want to sit down. I want to look at you and your home. He has talked about you and this house numerous times. He'd recall this place very often while he was composing The Cloud-Messenger.

Her gaze circles around the room, and then settles again on Mallika's face.

Today, it's precisely the attraction of this land that has brought us here. Otherwise, it would have been more convenient for us to travel to Kashmir by a different route.

MALLIKA: I can't figure out what formalities to follow in hosting you. If you'll take a seat, I'll. . . .

PRIYANGU: Don't fret about playing hostess. I haven't come to your home as a guest. . . . It was quite possible that he wouldn't come here, but I've brought him back to the village with a lot of special pleading. I wanted to see this region for myself at least once. Besides . . .

A sound of suppressed anguish escapes from her lips.

. . . besides, there was another reason. I wanted to carry away some of the atmosphere of this place with me.

MALLIKA: The atmosphere of this place?

Priyangumanjari looks at her with a smile, and then strolls to the window.

PRIYANGU: One can see even very distant mountain ranges from here. . . . What unsullied beauty! Now that I'm here, I feel envious of you.

Mallika advances a couple of steps towards her.

MALLIKA: It would be our good fortune if you'd stay in this region for a few days. Of course, you'll face inconveniences here, but. . . .

Priyangumanjari looks at her again with a pained expression.

PRIYANGU: All of life's conveniences seem trivial before this beauty. Even a whole lifetime isn't enough to drink it in with one's eyes.

She moves away from the window.

But where are the time and leisure to do so? The politics of Kashmir are so unstable that our staying away from it for a single day can create a host of problems. . . . The governorship of an entire province is an enormous responsibility. Our responsibility's even greater, because the situation in Kashmir is extremely dangerous at the moment. In a way, there's just as much talk about the beauty of Kashmir, but where will we have the leisure to view it?

She sits down on the window seat, and leans back on her arms.

That's why I'm envious of you. This easy enjoyment of beauty is a mere dream for us. . . . Sit down.

She gestures to Mallika to sit on the window seat beside her. When Mallika moves to sit on the floor, Priyangumanjari stops her.

Sit up here—next to me.

MALLIKA: Let me bring another seat.

She brings a round cane stool from another part of the room to the proximity of the window seat and sits down, gathering into her lap the bark manuscript sheets that were lying on it.

PRIYANGU: It seems that, even though you live in this rural province, you have an attachment to literature.

Mallika lowers her eyes.

Whose works are these?

MALLIKA: Kalidas's.

Priyangumanjari's eyebrows contract slightly.

PRIYANGU: Now he's known as Matrugupta. Are his works available even here?

MALLIKA: I've obtained these copies from merchants traveling from Ujjayini.

A slightly sarcastic smile appears on Priyangumanjari's lips.

PRIYANGU: I can understand that. I've learnt from him that you've been his companion since childhood. Your attraction towards his works is natural.

She begins to look at the ceiling, as though lost in thought.

Whenever he talks about this place, he becomes totally self-absorbed. That's why he frequently loses his concentration on political matters.

Her eyes settle on Mallika's face again.

On such occasions, one has to make a great effort to keep his mind on an even keel. Politics isn't literature. In politics, each and every moment's vital. If ever there's even a momentary lapse, it can result in great harm. To remain pivotal in political life, a person needs to be extremely vigilant. . . . Literature was the first phase of his life. Now he has entered the second phase. Most of my time's spent in an effort to ensure that this step forward doesn't become a step back. . . . This involves a lot of hard work.

She tries to smile.

Don't you think that's right?

MALLIKA: I don't know anything about life in politics.

PRIYANGU: Because you've always lived in the countryside.

She stands up abruptly. When Mallika also begins to get up, Priyangumanjari stops her by placing a hand on her shoulder, and makes her sit down again.

Keep sitting.

She walks around, biting her lower lip.

I told you I want to carry away some of the atmosphere of this place with me. That's because I don't want him to feel he's missing anything. Such a feeling often causes a lot of damage. He unnecessarily loses his composure, which wastes both time and energy. His time's very valuable. I don't want his time to be frittered in this way.

She pauses before Mallika.

That's why I'm taking a lot of things from here with me. We'll take some fawns, whom we'll rear in our garden in Kashmir. The medicinal herbs from here will be planted in the garden pavilion, and in the surrounding areas. We'll also have some houses in the style of this region constructed there. Matul and his family, too, will accompany us. We'll take some orphans from here and educate them there. I think all this will make a difference.

She strolls over to the other side of the room.

I see that your home's in a pretty dilapidated state. Its restoration's essential. If you want, I'll issue orders for this task before I leave. Two skilled builders have come with us from Ujjayini. What do you say?

Mallika rises and approaches her.

MALLIKA: You're very generous, but we're used to living in a home like this. That's why we don't find it inconvenient.

PRIYANGU: Even so, I'd like to have this house restored. The early years of his life also had a connection with this home. I've already ordered the construction of a new mansion in place of Matul's house. I've told the builders to get stone of the finest quality from Ujjayini and start the work. Regrettably, I won't be able to stay back and supervise the work in person. We'll have to start the rest of our journey tomorrow. . . . Why don't you come along with us?

Mallika stares at her incomprehendingly.

MALLIKA: Me?

Priyangu draws near and places a hand on her shoulder.

PRIYANGU: Yes! What's standing in the way? There's really nothing to bind you here that. . . .

MALLIKA: My mother's here.

PRIYANGU: That's no obstacle. Arrangements can be made to take your mother along as well. Our builders will work on the renovation of this house, and you'll live there with me as my companion.

An expression of hurt pride appears on Mallika's face. But she continues to keep herself in check.

MALLIKA: I beg your pardon. I don't see myself as having any right to such an honor.

PRIYANGU: But I believe you've a right to much more than this. . . . Before I arrived, two court officials came here.

A twisted smile appears again on her lips.

I didn't send them as a mere formality. Have you seen them?

Trying to figure out her meaning, Mallika looks at her uncertainly.

MALLIKA: I've seen them.

PRIYANGU: We can arrange for your marriage to whichever one of them you find suitable. Both are capable officials.

MALLIKA: Your Highness!

Clutching the bark manuscript to her chest, she retreats a few steps towards the window seat. Giving her a level look, Priyangumanjari walks slowly towards her.

PRIYANGU: It's possible that you find neither of them suitable. But these aren't the only two officials in the kingdom—there are many others. Come with me to Kashmir. Anyone you wish to marry. . . .

Mallika sits down on the window seat, and with suppressed frenzy bites her lip.

MALLIKA: Kindly stop discussing this subject.

Because her voice has become hoarse, the words are not clearly audible. The door to the inner room opens and Ambika appears, weak and trembling with illness and rage; then she stops as though to gather herself.

PRIYANGU: Why? Don't you have a vision of a home and a family of your own?

Ambika advances slowly towards them.

AMBIKA: No. She has no such vision.

Priyangumanjari turns around to look at Ambika. Mallika rises in a state of agitation.

MALLIKA: Ma!

AMBIKA: She has no such vision in her head because she lives at the level of pure emotion. For her, in life. . . .

She becomes breathless, and the words catch in her throat. Mallika puts down the manuscript sheets on the window seat, and, going up to Ambika, supports her by the back.

MALLIKA: Why did you get up and come out, Ma? You're unwell. Come, lie down inside.

Mallika wants to take Ambika back into the inner room; but Ambika pushes Mallika's hand off her back.

AMBIKA: Can't I even talk to a visitor? I've been suffocating here for days, months, years. For me this home isn't a home, it's a cave of death in which I'm locked up all the time. And you don't even want me to talk to anyone?

In an effort to walk, she stumbles. Mallika holds her up.

MALLIKA: But, Ma, you're unwell.

AMBIKA: I'm much better than you are.

She walks up to Priyangumanjari and looks her up and down.

This home hasn't always been in this condition, princess! When I was still active, I used to keep it spick and span every day. Everything here hadn't gone to wrack and ruin like this. But, nowadays, even the two of us, mother and daughter, just lie here, as though we'd gone to pieces. All this, because . . . .

Out of breath again, she's unable to speak further. Priyangumanjari moves away from her on the pretext of looking around the room.

PRIYANGU: I can see that the condition of this house isn't good. If Mallika could go with me, the problem would be solved easily. But now. . . .

Biting her lip, she pauses for a moment, as though to think.

I'll still do whatever's possible before I leave. I'll instruct the builders to demolish this house, and in its place. . . .

Mallika recoils.

MALLIKA: Please don't do that. Please don't give the order to demolish this house.

Priyangumanjari gives her a level look again.

PRIYANGU: I was saying that only out of consideration for you. If it's inconvenient, then . . . it's alright. I won't issue such an order. Still, I wish I could do something or other for you. I can't stay any longer now. I have to finish several essential tasks before tomorrow's journey. As it is, I didn't quite have the time. But I felt it was necessary to visit you. He went for a ride towards the mountain peak, and while he was away, I came here. Alright, then. . . !

Mallika wrings her hands and lowers her eyes. In her anger, Ambika takes a couple of steps towards Priyangumanjari.

AMBIKA: I want to say something to you, princess. I want to tell you that we people . . . we people . . . .

She begins coughing, which drowns out her words. Priyangumanjari turns at the front door to look at her.

PRIYANGU: I understand your pain. I'll certainly help you in any way I can. Right now, the attendants are waiting for me, so. . . .

She looks at Mallika with a somber smile, shakes her head, and leaves. Limp with emotion, Ambika continues to look in Priyangumanjari's direction. Then she practically collapses onto the window seat, picks up some manuscript sheets, and holds them out to Mallika.

AMBIKA: Here, read the lines from The Cloud-Messenger. Didn't you say that the tenderness of his inner self was embodied in them? Haven't you seen an even more embodied form of that tenderness today?

Mallika stares at her, as though transfixed.

If he wants to pay you the true worth of your pure emotion today, why don't you accept it? The four walls of this house will be restored, and

you'll be able to live in their household as a servant. What better fortune do you want?

MALLIKA: The princess has her own outlook on life, Ma. How can someone else be held responsible for it?

AMBIKA: But who's responsible for the princess's visit here? She undoubtedly came here in accordance with that person's wishes. The court's builders will renovate this house! Today he's in power, he has wealth. What better means could he have for acquainting us with that power and wealth?

MALLIKA: But, Ma . . . .

AMBIKA: Ma knows nothing, understands nothing. Ma can't plumb the depths of feeling, Ma. . . .

She starts coughing again, and can't speak further. Vilom enters.

VILOM: Why are you so upset, Ambika. . . ? The whole village is envying you your good fortune today.

He gives Mallika a meaningful look. She avoids his gaze and moves to the other side.

When the dust of royal feet blesses a house, people feel a great deal of pride. Such an occasion doesn't appear in everybody's life, does it?

AMBIKA: I've lived my life up to this day only to witness this occasion! How can such great good fortune fit into our mean little life?

She gets up abruptly.

Come, I'll go to the village and broadcast our good fortune in person to everybody. So many years of deprivation and pain have brought forth such big fruit that royal builders are going to renovate our house!

VILOM: Sit down, Ambika! The village has no time to listen to you today.

He strolls over to the window.

The people of the village are busy at this time. They have to put together a lot of different things for their guests from elsewhere. Today, those guests want to collect and cart away even the stones of this place. The stones of this place are now considered extremely valuable.

MALLIKA: The stones of this place were valuable earlier, too, Arya Vilom. It's a different matter that no one grasped their value before now.

Ambika angrily takes several steps towards Mallika.

AMBIKA: So why don't you go and collect some for yourself? It's possible that people may not leave a single stone in this place, and then there will be nothing to support your emotion.

MALLIKA: Sit down, Ma, your condition isn't good.

Holding Ambika by the arm, Mallika steers her to the window seat.

VILOM: There's a lot of excitement all over the village. This is the most festive day in the life of the region. People aren't worrying about their animals today. They're busy putting together all the food and drink for the visitors. On the special orders of the princess, there are also some fawns, among other things, that are being rounded up.

MALLIKA: That isn't true.

VILOM: Isn't true? The princess herself has ordered [two courtiers] to. . . .

MALLIKA: That order could have some other meaning, too.

VILOM: Some other meaning? What other meaning can it have? Will the princess play with those fawns, or will the artists of Ujjayini paint their likenesses? It's an entertaining spectacle that the artists from the capital accompanying the royal family are wandering about today, creating copies of every object in our village. They won't leave a single tree, leaf, or blade of grass here—of which they haven't created and carried away a copy.

MALLIKA: This, too, could have some other meaning.

Vilom leaves the window and draws closer to Mallika.

VILOM: When did I say there's no other meaning? The meaning's very clear. They see every object here in the form of a representation of strangeness, and they want to take that strangeness from here and display it to others. You, me, this house, these mountains—for them, these are all examples of the strange and the exotic. I, for one, commend their subtle and skillful vision, which can see strangeness even where no strangeness exists. I saw an artist today painting a portrait of his own shadow in the sunlight of this place.

AMBIKA: In the sunlight here they must find their own shadows unfamiliar! . . . Who was that female demon in our mythology who used to catch hold of every creature by its shadow?

She starts wheezing again as she talks.

I wish I was that female demon, so that today I could . . . today I could. . . .

Her coughing drowns her words. Mallika goes to her and supports her by the shoulders.

MALLIKA: I've told you, Ma, you should rest. Don't talk. . . . Arya Vilom, Ma isn't feeling well. Please let her rest now.

VILOM: Yes, take Ambika inside. The noise of the festivities in the village will disturb her mind even more. I came only to inform you about the celebrations. It's surprising that Kalidas didn't consider it appropriate to visit you. I've heard that they are leaving tomorrow.

AMBIKA: He didn't think it appropriate to visit us because he knows that Ambika's still alive.

VILOM: But I believe he'll certainly come here once. He ought to come. No one breaks a bond in this manner.

He strolls over to the window again.

And, especially, no one who possesses a poet's tender heart. What do you think, Mallika? Shouldn't he come here once?

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom, I've requested you to let Ma rest right now. Your talk unsettles Ma's mind.

VILOM: My talk unsettles Ambika's mind? I believe that the sources of the disturbance lie elsewhere. Ambika knows the causes of her agitation.

He looks out of the window.

I also understand those causes. That's why I come out and say many of the things that remain buried in Ambika's mind.

He turns to look at Mallika.

I know you find my presence disagreeable. That's nothing new. But I want to stay a bit longer.

He looks out again.

I see a horseman coming down from the mountain peak. It's possible that, this time, he'll stop here for a few moments. In that event, I'll also ask after his welfare. He and I have an old friendship.

Mallika begins to lose control of herself.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom, in that case, your presence here wouldn't be appropriate at all, from any perspective. If you'd like to meet him, then this isn't the only place to do so.

Vilom continues to look out of the window as before.

VILOM: But what's wrong with meeting him here? This is exactly where we met the day he left for Ujjayini. The passage of time will be imperceptible if we meet on the same spot after so many years.

Mallika goes up to Vilom, and, drawing him by the arm, wants to move him away from the window.

MALLIKA: I request you not to be obstinate about staying. . . .

Vilom does not budge from his position. The sound of hooves is audible in the distance.

I'm asking you to please go away. This is my house. I don't want you to be here right now.

Vilom remains standing as before. The sound of hooves keeps drawing closer. Mallika moves from the window to where Ambika is sitting.

Ma, tell him to go away. I don't want any undesirable situation to develop at this time. You're unwell, and I don't want anything to happen that might have a negative effect on your condition.

When Mallika shakes her, Ambika moves as though she has lost all power of mobility. Her brow is furrowed, and her eyes stare ahead without blinking. The sound of hooves draws very close. Mallika goes back to stand next to Vilom.

Arya Vilom, I've told you to go away. You don't know that. . . .

Having drawn very close, the sound of hooves begins to recede. Mallika comes to a standstill, as though thunderstruck. Vilom turns slightly to look at her.

VILOM: I'll leave.

A low sarcastic sound escapes from his lips.

I don't want to be the cause of any undesirable situation that might develop here. But can I ask—what undesirable situation could arise?

He moves from the window to the center of the room.

Well, Ambika, what undesirable situation would arise because of my presence here?

AMBIKA: I knew it. I've known it ever since then. If he'd come to see us, I'd have been surprised. Now, I'm not surprised.

Her voice grows shriller. Mallika sits down on the window seat very slowly, as though she had lost her strength.

Not surprised at all. I'm delighted that I was right about him. Life's only pure emotion! Tender emotion! Extremely, extremely tender emotion!

VILOM: But I'm sorry. I've waited for this day for years. I also had faith in our friendship. . . .

He gives Mallika a meaningful look.

Now, however, that trust's gone. Maybe the friendship was merely one-sided. He never thought us worthy of his friendship. And, then, friendship occurs only between like and like.

Mallika stands up abruptly. Her eyes are glistening with the harshness of failure and despair.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom!

Vilom looks at her with cruel condescension, as though toying with a child.

I'm telling you again that you should leave. Otherwise, we'll really have an undesirable situation on our hands.

VILOM: Is that so. . . ?

He looks at Ambika with a smile.

Then I should certainly leave. . . . Okay, Ambika! I worry a great deal about your health. As far as possible, please include ghee and honey in your diet. I've extracted some fresh honey recently. If you need some, I'll send it. . . .

MALLIKA: We don't need any honey. Our home has all the honey we need.

VILOM: Is that so? . . . Okay, Ambika!

He looks at both of them for a moment, and then walks away, but pauses at the door.

. . . but if you ever need any honey, don't hesitate to ask.

He leaves. Mallika stands subdued for a moment, with her head bowed. Unable to collect herself, she moves towards the inner room. Ambika's expression changes from anger to hopelessness, and from hopelessness to sympathy.

AMBIKA: Mallika!

Mallika stops. But she hides her face in her hands without answering. Ambika rises, walks slowly towards her, and takes her in her arms. Mallika buries her face in Ambika's shoulder. Her whole body trembles with grief, but no sound of crying escapes from her lips. Ambika's eyes brim with tears; holding Mallika's trembling frame close to herself, Ambika strokes her back soothingly. Then she begins to kiss the top of Mallika's head, and to rub her cheeks against it, affectionately.

You still want to weep? For that man? For that man who. . . ?

MALLIKA: Don't say anything about him, Ma, don't say anything. . . .

She breaks out into sobs. Ambika helps her sit down on the floor right there, and bends over her shaking back.

❦

End of Act Two

Act Three

After several more years.

The sound of rain and thunder. The curtain rises to reveal the same room. One lamp is lit. There is a visible difference between the room's condition now and what it was earlier. Everything is decrepit and in disarray. There is only one large jar left, and it is broken at the edge. The window seat has been moved from its old position, and the tiger skin is no longer on it. The decorations painted on the walls, such as the swastikas, are barely visible. There are only one or two blackened pots near the stove. Soiled and tattered clothes are piled up in a corner. Initially, there is no one in the room. [Then] Matul enters, in wet clothes and walking with a crutch. Looking all around, he sighs deeply and shakes his head in dismay. Then he moves to the middle of the room.

MATUL: Mallika!

Mallika's voice is heard from the inner room.

MALLIKA: Who is it?

MATUL: It's me, Matul. Look at what the rain has done to Matul!

He begins to brush the water off his head and to squeeze it out of his clothes. Mallika emerges from the inner room. Her clothes are torn in places, her complexion has darkened, and the expression in her eyes makes her look a little strange. Her personality shows the same kind of deterioration as the room itself. The portion of the inner room that is visible when the door is open now contains a rickety crib, instead of a bed. Mallika shuts the door behind her.

MALLIKA: Arya Matul—you, here in this rain?

MATUL: I had no refuge except your home, to escape from this rain. I thought that, no matter what, for Matul you're the same Mallika—that you'd let me in. . . . This monsoon rain will be the death of me! In the old days, when I could walk on two legs, I never worried about the rain, even the

heaviest rain. But now the situation's awful—when I put my crutch forward, my foot slips backwards, and when I put my foot forward, my crutch slips backwards. If I'd known that I'd break my leg in the king's palace, I'd never have left the village at all. And, in my absence, those royal builders turned my house into the kind of place where my feet can't grip the floors. Compared to the polished marble slabs I have now, my old clay floor was better, because at least it provided traction. I have a home but I'm homeless—I can't make it work either inside or outside. Just the sight of those white marble flagstones reminds me of the palace. Where I broke one of my legs!

MALLIKA: It will be hard for you to stand. Please sit down.

Matul goes to the window seat, puts down his crutch, and settles down, as though for good.

MATUL: If anyone were to ask me, I'd say that there can't be a more harrowing situation in the world than living in a palace. If you look in front, you see guards walking ahead of you. If you look back, you see guards walking towards you. To tell the truth, I could never figure out whether the guards were following me, or I was following the guards. . . . And what was even more painful—the very people to whom I wanted to bow respectfully would, instead, bow to me. Bow to me. . . ?

He gestures towards himself.

Tell me, what does Matul have before which anyone would bow his head? Matul's neither goddess nor god, neither priest nor king. Then why would anyone bow to Matul and worship him? But, no—people were ready to worship not only Matul, but even the clothes that came off his back! And I used to touch my limbs again and again to check whether my body was still a thing of flesh and blood, or whether it had turned into the kind of smooth stone that one finds in the images of gods and goddesses in temples. . . . When I come here, my greatest joy is that no one bows to worship me, and I don't have doubts about whether I'm the one walking in front, or whether there are guards walking ahead of me. The only thing I can't stand is this rain.

MALLIKA: Shall I light a fire to dry out your clothes?

Matul looks first at the stove, then all around him.

MATUL: What a state you've allowed your home to fall into! Now that Ambika's no more, the house isn't in its proper condition. . . . Is it true that

Priyangu-manjari sent you some clothes and gold jewelry that your refused to accept?

MALLIKA: I didn't need them.

She walks over to the pile of dirty clothes, pulls out a bark manuscript from underneath, and begins to dust it off.

MATUL: And she also told the builders to renovate this house.

MALLIKA: I didn't think any renovation was necessary.

She looks around for a place to keep the manuscript. Then she puts it down near Matul on the window seat.

Let me light a fire.

MATUL: No, the rain's ending now.

Taking up his crutch, he walks over to the widow.

It's only a light drizzle. If I can somehow drag myself home, I'll dry my clothes there. If the rain comes pouring down again, then. . . .

Moving away from the window, he draws close to Mallika.

Have you heard any news of Kashmir?

She gives him a fixed and somber look.

MALLIKA: I stay at home all the time. How can I receive any news from anywhere?

MATUL: I've heard the news. I can't believe it—but, then, I also can. Nothing's impossible in politics. If it's impossible for such-and-such thing to happen, then it's just as possible for the same thing to happen. And it's also perfectly possible that what happens doesn't happen. . . .

Mallika stares at him as though she were confounded.

MALLIKA: But what's the news?

MATUL: The news is that the king has passed away. Rebel powers are rearing their heads in Kashmir. A wounded soldier who has come back from there says that . . . that Kalidas has left Kashmir.

MALLIKA: He has left Kashmir?

She sits down on the window seat as though she were still catatonic.

And he has gone back now to Ujjayini?

MATUL: No. He hasn't gone back to Ujjayini. The people of the capital say that he has renounced everything, and has gone off to Kashi. But I don't believe it. He's so well-respected in the city. If it wasn't possible for him to stay on in Kashmir, then he ought to have gone straight to the capital. But it isn't impossible, either, that he has given up everything and has gone to Kashi. There's the life of politics—and then there's Kalidas! To this day, I haven't been able to figure out around what axis either of them turns. I believe the truth's always the exact opposite of whatever I'm able to grasp. And whenever I begin to arrive at the opposite, the truth flips into the opposite of that opposite. That's why, whatever I'm able to grasp is always untrue. From this, you can draw your own conclusion now, about what the truth is—whether he has renounced the world, or whether he hasn't. My understanding is that he hasn't renounced the world—so the truth must be that he has, indeed, renounced everything, and has gone off to Kashi.

Mallika picks up the bark manuscript next to her and clutches it to her breast.

MALLIKA: No, that can't be the truth. My heart doesn't accept it.

MATUL: What did I tell you? Whatever I say can never be the truth! That's why I say nothing. If he has gone to Kashi, then I'm lying. If he hasn't gone to Kashi, then, too, I'm lying. . . . That's the truth, isn't it?

Matul exits, walking noisily with his crutch. Mallika remains on the window seat, seemingly lost in thought.

MALLIKA: No, you haven't gone off to Kashi. You haven't renounced the world. That's not why I told you to leave this village. . . . I also didn't ask you to leave so that you could go and take on the burden of governance somewhere. When you did so, all the same, I still offered you my best wishes—even though you didn't accept them in person.

She looks at the manuscript in her hands, as though in accusation.

Even though I didn't retain my place in your life, you've retained yours in mine all this while. I never let you grow distant from me. You went on composing your poetry, and I continued to think that I was meaningful—that my life, too, had some use.

She puts the manuscript down on her knee.

And today you're going to reduce my life to meaninglessness in this way?

Placing the manuscript on the seat, she gazes at it with fear, anxiety, and dejection.

You may be detached from life, but I can't be detached from it now. Can you look at life with my eyes? Do you know how these years of my life have passed? What I've witnessed? What I was, and what I've become?

She rises and throws open the door to the inner room and gestures towards the crib.

Can you see this little creature? Can you recognize her? This is Mallika, who's growing up day by day, and, in place of Ma, I'm the one who's taking care of her now. . . . She's the child of my desolation. No one else could be the fulness, the feeling, that you were in me, but this womb of emptiness contains so, so many images of someone else! Do you know—I've lost my name and acquired an adjective in its place, and now, in my own eyes, I'm not a name but just an adjective.

Shutting the door, she walks towards the window seat.

The traders said there are rumors in Ujjayini—that you spend a lot of your time in the company of courtesans. . . . But have you seen *this* face of the courtesan? Can you recognize me today? Even now, I go to the mountain peak and look at the garlands of clouds, just as before. I read lines from The Gathering of Seasons and The Cloud-Messenger, just as before. I haven't allowed my womb of pure emotion to become barren. But can you measure the pain of my deprivation?

She sits down on the floor, with her elbows on the seat, and picks up the manuscript.

No, you can't measure it. You once wrote that a single flaw hides itself in a crowd of virtues, just as the moon's blemish hides itself in a multitude of

rays—but destitution can't hide itself. It can't hide itself even in a hundred good qualities. Not only can it not hide, it overshadows a hundred good qualities—destroys them, one by one.

As she speaks, she grows more deeply introspective.

But I endured all this. Because, even as I was breaking, I felt that you were making yourself. Because I saw myself, not in my own self, but in you. And today I hear that you're giving all this up, and renouncing the world? That you're detaching yourself from everyone and everything? Becoming indifferent? Is this the way you're going to disempower me?

Lightning flashes and thunder rolls.

It's a day in the season of rain, just as before. The thunder's rolling, just as before. It's raining, just as before. I'm the same, as before. In the same house, as before. But. . . .

Lightning and thunder again, and then the front door opens slowly. Kalidas appears in a devastated state and stands in the entranceway. In response to the sound of the door, Mallika looks towards it, and stands up abruptly. Kalidas enters the room. Mallika stares at him numbly.

KALIDAS: Perhaps you don't recognize me.

Mallika continues to stare at him numbly. Kalidas surveys the room, then looks Mallika up and down once, and walks over to the window seat.

And it's perfectly natural for you not to recognize me, because I'm not the person you've known in the past. I'm someone else.

He sits down on the window seat and leans back on his arms.

And, to tell the truth, I'm a person whom I myself don't recognize! . . . Why are you standing transfixed like this? Are you very surprised to see me?

Mallika shuts the front door, and then advances distractedly towards him.

MALLIKA: Surprised? I can't believe that you're you—and that this me, who's watching you, is really me!

KALIDAS: I can see that you, too, aren't the same. Everything has changed. Or, it's possible that only my vision has changed.

MALLIKA: I can't believe that this isn't a dream. . . .

KALIDAS: No, it isn't a dream. The reality is that I'm here. After a journey lasting many days, I've arrived here—exhausted, broken, and defeated—because I want to experience the reality of this place once more.

MALLIKA: You're soaking wet. I don't have any dry clothes for you, but I. . . .

KALIDAS: Don't worry about my being wet. . . . Do you know, to get wet in the rain like this can also be an ambition in life? It has been years since I got drenched. I don't want to dry off as yet. The walking had tired me out. For several days I was running a fever. But it's as though this rain has taken away all my weariness. . . .

Mallika draws closer to him.

MALLIKA: Are you very tired?

KALIDAS: I was. I still need to rest, but the rain has taken away the exhaustion.

MALLIKA: You're really unrecognizable.

Kalidas looks at her for a moment, then gets up and goes to the window.

KALIDAS: And who could recognize you, either? How this house, too, has changed! And I was hoping that everything would be the same—exactly as it was, in its place. . . . But nothing's in its proper place.

He looks all around.

You've changed everything. Every single thing.

MALLIKA: I'm not the one who has made the change.

Kalidas looks at her, and then begins to walk about.

KALIDAS: I know you haven't made the change. But, Mallika, . . .

He comes close to her.

. . . I didn't think this house would ever seem unfamiliar to me. The position and arrangement of every object was so settled. But, today, everything seems strange, and . . .

He looks into her eyes.

. . . and even you. You, too, seem unfamiliar. That's why I say it's possible that the scene hasn't changed as much as my sight has.

MALLIKA: You're tired—sit down. Your eyes look as though you're still unwell.

KALIDAS: I've arrived after many days of wandering from place to place. The reason why I didn't visit you when I was on my way to Kashmir is precisely the reason why I'm visiting you today.

For a moment their gazes meet and lock.

MALLIKA: I learnt from Arya Matul a short while ago that you've left Kashmir.

KALIDAS: Yes, because my desire for power and status has left me. Today, I'm free of everything that constricted me for years. In Kashmir, people think that I've renounced the world. But I haven't renounced the world. I've only liberated myself from the persona of Matrugupta, so that I may live in the persona of Kalidas again. There has always been an attraction pulling me towards the connection I broke off when I left this place. After my departure, nowhere else could I find the intimacy I'd known with each and every thing here. I've a precise memory of the form and shape of every object here.

He looks around the room again.

Jars, tiger skin, reed mats, clay lamps, wall decorations . . . and your eyes. What I'd seen of your eyes the day I left is still etched in my memory, to this day. I've been convincing myself all this while that, whenever I return, everything here will be exactly the same as before.

Someone knocks at the door. Taken aback, Mallika looks towards the entranceway. Kalidas wants to go open the door, but she stops him.

MALLIKA: Don't open the door. Go on with what you're saying.
KALIDAS: At least go and see who it is.

MALLIKA: It's a rainy day. It could be anybody. You go on talking. He'll go away.

The person at the door turns away, cursing in a drunken voice.

[VILOM's *voice offstage*: ". . . Her door's always shut . . . what's this? . . . The door's always shut!"]

KALIDAS: Who was that?

MALLIKA: I told you, it could be anybody. Anyone might need shelter in the rain.

KALIDAS: But I found his voice very strange.

MALLIKA: You were talking about this place.

KALIDAS: I felt as though I knew the voice. Like all the other things here, it, too, seemed to be the altered form of a familiar thing—a voice.

MALLIKA: You're tired and unwell. Sit down and talk.

Kalidas sighs and sits down on the window seat. Mallika sits down on the floor at a little distance from him, with her arms resting on her knees.

KALIDAS: I've thought many times about myself, Mallika, and every time I've come to the conclusion that Ambika was right.

He stretches his arms behind him, and raises his eyes to the ceiling.

Why didn't I want to leave this place at that time? One reason was that I had no confidence in myself. I didn't know what sort of experience I'd have in an environment of fame and honor, after living a life of deprivation and abuse. Somewhere in my mind was the anxiety that such an environment would overwhelm me, and change my life's direction. . . . And this anxiety wasn't quite baseless.

His eyes turn towards Mallika.

You were very surprised that I was going to take up the governorship of Kashmir, weren't you? You must have found that very unnatural. But none of it seems unnatural to me. It was a natural reaction to a life of deprivation. Quite possibly, my reaction also contained a desire for revenge against all the people who'd abused me at will, who'd mocked and derided me.

Biting his lip, he gets up abruptly and goes to the window.

But I also knew I couldn't be happy. Over and over again, I tried to convince myself that the source of this shortcoming wasn't my environment, but my own self. If I could change myself, I'd be happy. But this didn't happen. Neither could I change, nor could I be happy. I was granted power and authority, I was given a great deal of honor, manuscript copies of whatever I wrote reached every corner of the country—but I couldn't find happiness. That environment and that way of life might have been natural for someone else, but they weren't for me. My field of action was different from a ruler's field of action. Over and over again, I felt that, by falling into the temptations of lordship and leisure, I'd entered the ruler's field illegitimately, and that I was far removed from the terrain on which I should have stayed. Whenever my gaze fell upon the horizon stretching far into the distance, I was pained by the perception that I'd removed myself from my own proper domain. I would reassure myself that one day—tomorrow, if not today—I'd establish full control over my circumstances, and divide myself equally between the two fields of action. But I continued to be molded and driven by my circumstances. The tomorrow that I was waiting for never arrived, and I went on breaking up, breaking up, into pieces. And, one day . . . one day, I discovered that I was completely broken. I wasn't the person who was connected to that large domain.

He falls silent for a moment. Then he resumes walking about.

I didn't want to pass through this place on my way to Kashmir. I felt at the time that this region, this range of mountains and valleys, would confront me in the form of a mute question. Still, I couldn't resist the temptation to be back in the village. But I didn't experience any joy in being here. I was repelled by myself. I was also repelled by all those people who celebrated the day of my visit with festivities. That was the first time my heart and mind longed to be free. But it wasn't possible to be free then. I didn't visit you on that day because I was afraid your eyes would make my restless heart even more restless. I wanted to save myself from such a situation. It could have had any consequence. I knew what effect my failure to visit you would have on you, what others would say. Nevertheless, I was certain that you wouldn't have any negative feelings in that context. And I left with the hope that there would come a day when I'd be able to say all this to you, and convince you about the conflicts in my mind. . . . I didn't realize then that conflict doesn't limit itself to just one person, that change doesn't move only in one direction. That's why I've a great sense of futility about being here today.

He goes back to the window.

People think I've written a lot while living that life and living in that environment. But I know I haven't written anything while living there. Whatever I've written is only the cumulative effect of my life here. These Himalaya mountains are the background of The Birth of the Young God, and the ascetic goddess Uma, in that long poem, is you. The anguish of the imprisoned demigod in The Could-Messenger is my anguish, and his wife, stricken by the grief of separation from him, is you—even though, in the poem, I've imagined myself trapped on a mountain peak here, and envisioned you living in the city. In my play called Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition, you were the one who stood before me in the form of its heroine, Shakuntala. Whenever I tried to write, I repeated the history of your life and mine. And whenever I sought to write at a distance from that history, my work didn't spring to life. The lamentation of one of the figures in my epic, The Lineage of Lord Rama, is nothing but a representation of my own pain, and. . . .

Mallika hides her face in her hands. Kalidas stops speaking suddenly, and stares at her for a moment.

I wanted you to be able to read all this, but the connecting thread broke in such a way that. . . .

Removing her hands from her face, Mallika shakes her head to negate his statement.

MALLIKA: The connecting thread never broke.

She picks up the bark manuscript wrapped in cloth, and places it in Kalidas's hands. He turns its pages and looks at it.

KALIDAS: The Cloud-Messenger! How did a copy of The Cloud-Messenger reach you?

MALLIKA: I have all your works. I was able to get copies of The Lineage of Lord Rama and Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition just a few months ago.

KALIDAS: You have all my works? But how did you find them here? Did. . . ?

MALLIKA: The merchants of Ujjayini sometimes travel along this route, too.

KALIDAS: And you can get these manuscript copies from them?

MALLIKA: I asked them specially to get the copies for me. Each time it took a year or two to find a copy somewhere.

KALIDAS: And the money to pay for them?

MALLIKA: It took a year or two to get a copy. There was plenty of time to save up the money.

Kalidas sits down on the window seat with his head bowed.

KALIDAS: The deprivations that have pinched me for years look even larger today, Mallika! I should have returned to this place years ago, so that I could have let the rain drench me, and so that, drenched, I could have written—written everything that I haven't been able to write so far, and that has been accumulating inside me like clouds in the season of rain.

Sighing deeply, he picks up the bark manuscript lying on the seat, and begins to turn its pages.

But what has gathered like clouds inside me is unable to rain. Because it can't find its proper season. It can't find the right wind. . . . What poem is this? These are merely blank pages!

MALLIKA: I made these bark pages with my own hands and stitched them together. I thought that when you came visiting from the capital, I'd give you this blank book as a gift. That I'd say—compose your biggest epic on these pages. But, even when you visited once, you chose not to visit, and this gift was left here, ungiven. Now these bark sheets are beginning to fall apart, and I feel hesitant in saying that they're for you to write on.

Kalidas keeps turning the pages.

KALIDAS: You made these bark sheets with your own hands so that I may write my epic on them!

Turning the pages, he pauses at one place in the bound volume.

Drops of water have fallen on the pages in various places, but there's no doubt that they weren't drops of rain. It seems that you've written a great deal on these blank sheets with your eyes. And not just with your eyes—in some places, the pages are soiled with beads of sweat, in other places, dry flower petals have left traces of their color. In many places, your nails have peeled off their layers, your teeth have bitten them apart. And, other than these marks, the fading and discoloration caused by the summer sun, the dust of crumbling winter leaves, and the dampness of this house. . . . In

what sense are these pages blank anymore, Mallika? An epic has already been composed on them—an epic with an infinite number of cantos.

He puts down the volume.

What new writing can be done on these pages now?

Rising, he goes to the window. He looks out for a few moments, then turns back towards Mallika.

But there's life still ahead of us. We can begin again from the beginning.

The baby's crying and whimpering is heard from the inner room. Mallika gets up quickly and walks towards it, visibly anxious and perturbed. Kalidas watches her go, as though he were dumb-struck.

KALIDAS: Mallika!

Mallika pauses and looks at him.

Who's crying?

MALLIKA: This is my present life.

She goes inside. Kalidas comes and stands in the middle of the room, as though he were frozen.

KALIDAS: Your present life?

Someone knocks at the front door, then kicks it open. Vilom appears in the entranceway, cursing at the door. His clothes are muddy. He enters, swaying a little.

VILOM: On a wet day, brother Vilom, you've slipped and fallen, and fallen straight into a ditch. . . . I've told you so often, don't ever climb up too high. But why would brother Vilom listen? When he first came, the door was shut. He went away and slipped and fell. He came back, and the door was shut. And suppose he'd gone away again? Today is the kind of day when. . . .

Seeing Kalidas, he stops in mid-sentence. He looks like someone examining a minute object very carefully.

Who knows what's happened to these eyes of mine? Sometimes unfamiliar figures look very familiar, and sometimes even familiar figures don't look familiar. . . . Now, this is a very familiar figure, but I just can't recognize it. I know this figure well, but the person seems unknown. . . . Hey, brother, do you know me?

Mallika emerges from the interior and, catching sight of Vilom, freezes at the door of the inner room.

KALIDAS: Your appearance has changed a lot, but you're still the same person today.

VILOM: I'm acquainted with this voice, and also these words.

He tries to fix his eyes upon Kalidas, and to look closely. Then he suddenly bursts into laughter.

So, it's you—you? . . . All my troubles from falling and hurting myself have vanished! I've had such a desire to set my eyes upon you, for so long. Come. . . .

He opens his arms towards Kalidas, but the latter moves away.

You won't embrace me? Because there's mud all over me? Or do you just detest me? But the connection you and I have can't be broken off so easily. You'd said, hadn't you, that we're very close to each other. Didn't you say that? In all these years I haven't let any distance or difference creep into our closeness. I believe we're even closer now.

He turns towards Mallika.

Why, Mallika, am I not right? . . . Why are you standing there, as though you were frozen? Vilom's no longer an uninvited guest in this home. Now he enters it by right. No? Now he can welcome Kalidas, and play host to him in this house. No?

He turns to Kalidas again.

You'll remark how much of a matter of chance this is—that we met in this house long ago, and that we're meeting at the same spot again today. But, believe me, it isn't a matter of chance. Whenever you've visited, this is where we've met.

He turns towards Mallika once more.

You haven't yet given Kalidas his ritual welcome as a guest? To have a guest in your home after many years—and no proper welcome for him? Do you know—know how much Kalidasa loves the fawns of this region. . . ?

He turns back towards Kalidas.

There's a little fawn in this house, too. . . . Haven't you seen Mallika's little girl? Her eyes are no less beautiful than a fawn's. And do you know what our local diviner says? He says. . . .

Mallika steps forward quickly.

MALLIKA: Arya Vilom!

Vilom laughs.

VILOM: You don't want Kalidas to know what the diviner says! But I'm not persuaded by the diviner's observation. That's why I was about to say, it's possible that Kalidas may be able to look and tell how far he's right. Do the little girl's features really resemble Vilom's features, or. . . ?

Hiding her face in her hands, Mallika goes to the window seat and sits down. Vilom moves close to Kalidas.

Come—will you look?

KALIDAS: Go away, Vilom!

VILOM: Go away?

He laughs.

From this house, or from the province itself? I've heard that governance is very powerful business. There's a lot of power and wealth in lordship.

KALIDAS: I'm telling you to leave right now.

VILOM: Just because you've come back? . . . Because the land you left many years ago seems to be yours again today? . . . Because your rights are perpetual?

He laughs.

You talk as though life has no motion, no vitality, outside you. All that exists is you—there's no one else. But time isn't heartless. It has empowered others, too. Has given them rights. Time didn't stop short on the threshold of a temple, bearing incense and offerings of food, without actually offering them to the gods in the sanctum. It has given others opportunity! It has built something. . . . Are you repelled by what time has built? Just because you don't find yourself where you wanted to be?

Vilom stares at Kalidas for several moments, and then laughs again.

You want me to leave immediately. I'll leave. Not because you're ordering me to leave. Only because you're a guest here today, and a guest's wish must be honored.

He walks towards the front door, but pauses near it and looks back at Mallika.

Make sure, Mallika, that nothing's lacking in our hospitality. We don't know whether a guest who's visiting us for the first time in many years will ever come back, and give us another such opportunity.

He gives both Mallika and Kalidas a meaningful look and leaves. Mallika uncovers her face and looks at Kalidas. Both remain silent for a few moments.

MALLIKA: What are you thinking about?

Kalidas walks over to the window.

KALIDAS: I'm thinking that that was a day in the season of rain exactly like this one. Clouds were amassed in the valley exactly like this, and an untimely darkness had set in. I saw a wounded fawn in the valley, and I picked it up and brought it here. You took very good care of it.

Mallika gets up and goes near him.

MALLIKA: You're thinking about something else, too!

KALIDAS: And I'm thinking that the expanse of lowlands at the foot of the mountains is still the same. The path that leads to the mountain peak is also the same. The moisture in the wind is as it was before. The sounds in the environment are also as they were before.

MALLIKA: And?

KALIDAS: And that it's the same tremulous consciousness within me. It's the same heart, in which there's a burst of emotion. But . . .

Mallika looks at him in silence. Kalidas moves from the window to the seat, where he picks up the blank book.

. . . but, on that day, this epic of blank pages wasn't yet written.

MALLIKA: You were saying that you want to begin again at the beginning.

Kalidas sighs.

KALIDAS: I said that I want to begin from the beginning. Perhaps it was a coupling, a hyphenation—or a conflict—of desire and time. But I see that time is more powerful than desire, because. . . .

MALLIKA: Because?

The baby's crying is audible from the interior once more. Mallika rushes into the inner room. Kalidasa puts down the volume on the seat, and speaks as though he were answering her question, but only to himself.

KALIDAS: Because time doesn't wait.

Lightning flashes and thunder rolls. Kalidas looks all around once and goes to the window. It begins to rain. Returning to the seat, he picks up the blank book and looks at it one more time, then sets it down again. He casts a glance towards the inner room, then goes to the entranceway. He pauses there for a moment, as though lost in thought. Then he leaves, and shuts the front door behind him. The sound of thunder and rain increases. After a few moments, Mallika emerges from the inner room, holding the baby close to her breast. Not seeing Kalidas, she runs to the window.

MALLIKA: Kalidas!

Still clutching the baby, she goes from the window to the entrance-way, and throws open the front door.

Kalidas!

She begins to move towards the threshold, but seeing the child in her arms, she comes to a stop right there. As though broken in spirit, she goes to the window seat and sits down. Hugging the

child closer to herself, she begins to weep and kiss it. Lightning flashes again and again, and the thunder continues to roll.

The End

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